

Reviews contents

- Paul Williams & Shelley Davidow, *Playing With Words: An Introduction to Creative Writing Craft*
review by Alyson Miller page 3
- Stephanie Vanderslice (ed), *Studying Creative Writing Successfully*
review by Sally Breen page 6
- Anna Leahy (ed), *What We Talk about When We Talk about Creative Writing*
review by Jeremy Fisher page 9
- Roslyn Petelin, *How Writing Works: A field guide to effective writing*
review by Rosemary Williamson page 12
- Toby Litt, *Mutants: Selected Essays*
review by Maria Tumarkin page 16
- Jen Webb, *Sentences from the Archive*
review by Ioana Petrescu page 19
- Sarah Corbett, *And She Was: A Verse-Novel*
review by Linda Weste page 22
- Paddy Roe, *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*
review by Jeanine Leane page 26
- Michelle Cahill, *Letter to Pessoa & other short fictions*
review by Ruby Todd page 30
- Maria Katsonis and Lee Kofman (eds), *Rebellious Daughters: True Stories from Australia's Finest Female Writers*
review by Jessica Gildersleeve page 34
- David Carlin & Francesca Rendle-Short (eds), *The Near and the Far: New Stories from the Asia-Pacific Region*
review by Nicholas Jose page 37
- Jeremy Fisher, *Faith, Hope and Stubborn Pride: Searching for heaven in Aotearoa and Australia*
review by Noeline Kyle page 40
- Anthony Macris, *Inexperience and other stories*
review by Helen Gildfind page 43

- John Kinsella, *Graphology Poems 1995-2015*
review by Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington page 46
- Kevin Brophy, *Misericordia: Poems inspired by the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy*
Michael Campbell, Kevin Brophy, Niké Arrighi Borghese & George Palmer, *The Faces of Mercy: An Australian offering for the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy*
review by Charlotte Clutterbuck page 56
- Owen Bullock, *River's Edge*
review by Jane Williams page 60
- Eddie Paterson, *redactor*
review by Rose Lucas page 63
- Louise Nicholas, *The List of Last Remaining*
review by Niloofar Fanaiyan page 66
- Glenice Whitting, *Something Missing*
review by Rachel Hennessy page 69

TEXT review

‘Underneath, a tiger lurks’: Learning writing craft

review by Alyson Miller



Paul Williams & Shelley Davidow

Playing With Words: An Introduction to Creative Writing Craft

Palgrave, London UK 2016

ISBN 9781137532527

Pb 200pp GBP16.99

As Marcelle Freiman (2003) has noted, the question of whether or not creative writing can be taught has long been the topic of debate, especially within academic institutions. The tension is often based on Romantic visions of the misanthropic writer, whose works of genius are produced in response to the Muses or other mystic forms of inspiration. Engaging or even exceptional writing is, therefore, understood as a natural talent rather than a learned skill, resulting in, as Freiman contends, the assumption that ‘creative writing cannot be taught; that chosen students will simply develop their already-identified creative talent’, while protecting their sense of originality and creativity’ (Freiman 2003).

Playing with Words, however, manages to deftly negotiate such arguments through an emphasis on the discipline of craft. Essentially a manual on developing writing skills systematically and through practice, Davidow and Williams eschew the image of the writer as divinely gifted and focus on the rules and mechanics needed to ‘make our words do what we want them to do, regardless of genre, format or style. To really harness the power of words, we need to become skilled craftspeople who can mould and shape our material so that the finished product is as close to what we imagined as possible’ (2). Importantly, the authors repeatedly stress the significance of play, both through writing exercises which encourage experimentation, and via an instructive approach that is underpinned by a sense of wonderment for the ‘mind-bending’ potential of language (2). While such a framework, at times, risks being incredulous, a belief in the transformative possibilities of words, of the ways in which ‘language creates reality’ (17), seems apt in a contemporary media and political climate of ‘alternate facts’ and ‘fake news’. The awe invoked by Davidow

and Williams is thus also grounded in a realisation of the functionality of words; the ability of language, that is, to get the work done:

The miraculous concept is this: although words are essential tools to construct intangible things like thoughts and ideas and imagined alternative realities, they are ultimately just the keys we use to unlock limitless realms of stories and ideas. And so, our job, ironically, is to work with words so expertly that they eventually vanish. (2)

Indeed, *Playing with Words* is fundamentally pragmatic, methodically attending to the nuances of structure, character, voice, symbolism, perspective, rhythm, and tone. Davidow and Williams have ensured a careful balance between exposition and practice, with the assertion – albeit gently – that strong writing comes from an insistence on form and detail, and a willingness to be (self-) interrogative. Drawing on Flaubert’s remark about the tigers which lurk beneath smooth surfaces, the authors observe: ‘Good writing may look effortless. When the words disappear into the picture for our readers, it’s because we have pummelled and tussled with our writing, even wept over our ineptitude, to make it work’ (15). While the evocation of the work of writing perhaps retains its romance here – especially alongside the somewhat banal and persistent reminder that words are ‘living, changing, evolving things’ (18) – writing is, nonetheless, still *work*, and required to master a discipline. As the text makes clear, a writer is not a vessel of the gods but a craftsperson dedicated to learning an acquired set of skills: ‘a finished piece may ultimately seem to flow like water somersaulting effortlessly over the edge of a flooded gutter, but underneath lurk thought tigers wrestled into position by our struggles’ (16). Certainly, the regularity with which Davidow and Williams equate the writing process with a kind of violence (‘pummelled and tussled’, ‘wrestled’, ‘struggles’) seems indicative, positioning the writer as constantly in battle with language, meaning and representation.

Warring aside, the strength of *Playing with Words* is in its accessibility, arguably achieved through wariness towards theory and a rejection of jargon and painstaking semantics. The recommended writing exercises are succinct and careful, designed to fine-tune set skills – such as avoiding melodrama or cliché – and to challenge aspiring writers to new forms and styles. The use of classic and contemporary authors, from Mark Twain and Virginia Woolf to Dr Seuss and Stephen King, illustrate the importance of precision, innovation, voice, and play, whilst also acknowledging that the best writers indeed often emerge from the best readers. The literary anchoring of *Playing with Words* makes its lessons all the more compelling, however the anecdotal interruptions from the authors are not always quite so persuasive. While there is merit in a method that practices what it preaches, it is also always difficult to believe that the authors’ own work is the best possible example of character or the polyphonic novel or dialogue-driven narrative. This form of navel-gazing is somewhat regressive, and would have been better offset with a more rigorous understanding of theory and its relationship to creative practice. The tutorial effect, in which reading the text mimics the ‘live’ performance of classroom engagement, is appealing yet too often lapses into the narcissism associated with teaching creative writing. Indeed, it is an echo of the ‘romance of the writer’, which, as Freiman argues, prizes ‘the writer, not the relationship between text and reader, not ... the written text and its language’ (2003).

As a writing tool, *Playing with Words* offers content that is both practical and aspirational, focusing on the discipline of writing as well as its appeal as a craft or art form. By concentrating on hard skills that can be shaped and honed through time and practice, Davidow and Williams dispel an idea of the writer as 'creating original works of genius through a mystical and a-social process' (Freiman 2003), and thus the argument that writing cannot be taught. Through attention to the power of words and the transformative force of language, *Playing with Words* suggests that writing is a kind of game, albeit one with rules that can make for radical and metamorphic results:

The big idea is that the way we use words locates us, and our writing, in a specific context, in a particular time and place. As writers, if we're sensitive to this change, to the power behind our words in the time we're alive, we can them to shape the worlds we imagine, but also the ones we inhabit on a daily basis. (18)

Works cited

Freiman, M 2003 '*Dangerous Dreaming: Myths of creativity*', *TEXT* 7, 2 (October): <http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct03/freiman.htm> return to text

Alyson Miller teaches literature and creative writing at Deakin University. Her short stories and prose poems have appeared in both national and international publications, alongside a work of criticism, Haunted by Words: Scandalous Texts, and a collection of prose poems, Dream Animals.

TEXT

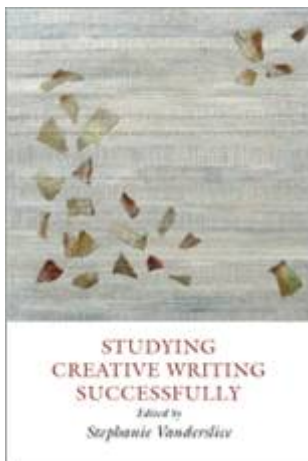
Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo & Julianne van Loon

Reviews Editor: Linda Weste

text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT review**Studying creative writing successfully***review by Sally Breen**Studying Creative Writing Successfully*

Stephanie Vanderslice (ed)

Creative Writing Studies, Frontinus, Suffolk UK 2016

ISBN 9781907076862

Pb 162pp USD25.00

Studying Creative Writing Successfully edited by Stephanie Vanderslice, Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Arkansas, is a collection of conversational, informal articles designed to introduce students to the particulars of studying a degree in creative writing. The text as a whole focuses less on writing instruction and composition (although this line of inquiry does feature anecdotally throughout); the concentration is instead on what to expect in a creative writing degree and how to ‘demystify the habitual practises of the field’ (cover), a kind of read and thrive survival guide. Each of the eleven chapters is written by a wide range of American creative writing academics with an impressive combined list of pedagogical publications. The chapters cover diverse ground largely split into three key concerns – context, practice and career advice. Context is established in a set of chapters which seek to outline the teaching and learning of creative writing in the academy including a lively feature on on-line study by Joseph Rein and an informative rationale of how creative writing is graded, by Julie Platt.

Discussions of practice deal with what appear to be a curated set of elements the contributors believe commencing students may not have considered at length already. Tim Mayers discusses the difference between reading as a writer and writing as a reader. Dianne Donnelly offers a broad breakdown of reflective and exegetical composition. Mary Ann Cain emphasises the importance of revision and drafting. The remaining chapters take a longer term view offering practical advice on how to sustain a career as a writer after study, how to read work to audiences effectively and the importance of good literary citizenship – essential inclusions not often covered in similar instruction manuals.

In the editor's preface, Vanderslice stresses that the book will be useful for those studying at all levels of creative writing programs. The broad focus and accessible (if sometimes simplistic tone) is however, more suited to first year students and perhaps students embarking on postgraduate study without prior experience – a situation more pertinent to US based MFA programs and less likely to occur in other national contexts where students enter postgraduate study via honours programs or with significant industry experience. This is undoubtedly a first year text. In a sense *Studying Creative Writing Successfully* heads off many of those naive questions which often surface from new students – how is it possible for you to grade my creativity? Why do I have to write an explanation of my story? Everything I want to say is in the story. Why can't every one of us be as famous as Stephen King?

In this way the book's usefulness is immediately apparent – it is straightforward and works well by covering the key bases of creative writing study that teachers in the discipline can sometimes find themselves reiterating. The book may enable students to develop a strong base knowledge in these areas quickly by dismissing myths, managing expectations and explaining, often in didactic detail – how creative writing works. In this way the book could have a place as a supplementary text in an introduction to creative writing course allowing students to progress at a faster pace, by dealing in a comprehensive way, the institutional related confusions they often have. There is also the possibility that it could fall flat. The problem with deliberately designing a book to be accessible is that it can come across as condescending or reductionist to any commencing student with above average intelligence or prior knowledge of the field resulting in a depletion of that student's passion for creative writing and their study rather than enhancing it.

In seeking to manage student expectations, to give them insight into the realities of a writing life many of the articles advocate a middle of the road approach: a book dominated by very useful advice for not dreaming too large. In a chapter on creative writing study preparedness 'What Should I Expect and What Skills Should I Bring' Trent Hergenrader shares his thoughts on 'the handful of writers I know who draw a hefty annual salary ... they all live rather modest lifestyles in unglamorous places in Ohio, Colorado, not New York City or Montreal. They do not party with rockstars. They have families and drive sensible cars' (27). This is typical of the no-nonsense if rather dispiriting perspective reiterated throughout; a perspective that could be challenged relatively easily because the issue with any subjective assessment of the writing scene is that it can be contradicted. For every story there is always another one.

If students do everything in this book they will almost certainly be good students. They will achieve good grades. They might even end up good writers but not necessarily because of what they read here. My sense is the very best writers and thinkers amongst them will resist the instruction. There is a grating quality to the use of second person as a guiding narrative principle, and combined with the superior or overly enabling tone that permeates, some emerging writers might feel smothered or infuriated. The approach might work for a medium to large section of the cohort who respond to this type of guidance – particularly given the exponential growth of creative writing programs and graduates and subsequent focus on delivery. Twenty-first century creative writing programs are producing fewer writers per se and more people who'll use writing in creative ways in other vocations and industries, which is fine, but what this state of play seems to require and what this book represents is a re-jigging of the initial

promise, the great attraction of a creative writing degree in the first place. Here's how to settle. Here's how to feel good about a career in advertising or writing copy in corporate America or churning out poetic vignettes about light fittings for a company who outfits nightclubs and casinos. Here's how to be an academic. Just because all of these pathways occur and that many of them have great rewards doesn't mean the notion of the 'Big W' writer should be distilled. Very few students come into creative writing wanting to be the lovely people who teach them or the modest, sensible people in the case studies provided. They want to be more, even if that ambition is risky, unlikely or even misguided. It is worth noting here that as far as can be gleaned from the biographies, none of the contributors has published a novel. Only one has released a full book of poems. Most have released more pedagogical books and papers than they have book-length creative work and this leaning probably accounts for and in some ways justifies the approach taken – creative writing operating at the edge of something else and not the centre.

Dr Sally Breen is Senior Lecturer in Writing and Publishing at Griffith University. She is fiction editor of the Griffith Review and author of The Casuals (2011) and Atomic City (2013) both with Harper Collins. Dr Breen's scholarly articles can be viewed at <https://griffith.academia.edu/SallyBreen>

[Return to Contents Page](#)

[Return to Home Page](#)

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo & Julianne van Loon

Reviews Editor: Linda Weste

text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT review

Nattering in the tea room

review by Jeremy Fisher



What We Talk about When We Talk about Creative Writing

Anna Leahy (ed)

New Writing Viewpoints

Multilingual Matters, Bristol UK 2016

ISBN 9781783096008

Pb 250pp GBP29.95

Why is ‘when’ capitalised in the title of this book while the two ‘abouts’ are not? What style is the publisher following? Is the capitalisation of prepositions and conjunctions in book titles a more important question than those raised in this book? To me, it is, as I found so much of the discussion in this fourteenth book in the New Writing Viewpoints series to be vapid and insubstantial. This is harsh criticism but unfortunately this was the view I formed as I made my way through the book attempting to refrain from judgement but increasingly annoyed by what ultimately I deemed to be a lack of academic rigour.

The book is arranged in six seemingly relevant sections: Introduction; Pedagogy; Programs; The Profession; Careers; and Conclusions. The chapter titles within the sections, however, suggest style has sublimated substance. The use of terms such as ‘Writerly reading’, ‘Text(ure)’, and ‘(Re)Defined’, and clichés such as ‘Peas in a Pod’ and ‘The Bold and the Beautiful’ begin to define the shape of the book, and regrettably it is not a shape nor a form that I found to be capable of defending writing as an academic discipline. Here was artifice claiming to be taken seriously. The point is not to reinvent academic writing; the point is to ensure our use of this genre demonstrates our mastery of it in all respects, including relatively minor ones such as capitalisation.

Anna Leahy, Associate Professor of English, Associate Director of the MFA in Creative Writing and Director of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity at Chapman University, USA, is listed as co-author or author for all chapters. While this demonstrates her dedication to this

project, it might also indicate an overly zealous editorial role. This may not be the case, but the way the book is structured surely can only be the result of Leahy's editing. She admits as much in her introduction where she notes the book 'is purposefully constructed as conversation, in large part because ... innovation emerges from collision – from talk – and the university is full of smart people testing out interesting ideas' (7). The chapters have been assembled to suggest conversations are taking place. Editorially this is quite an accomplishment; however, different voices offering alternate or supportive viewpoints, some of them of dubious relevance in an academic text ('Life is the central component in the creative process', 39) lead to the absence of sustained argument. I also found this approach affected, with style imposed on text for little effect. It all seemed forced.

The book features United States contributors only. The Americans do show an awareness of *TEXT* and the British journal *New Writing* (24), but there is no evidence they have read either. All the references at the end of each chapter are American. Discussion is restricted to North American teaching and practice. This greatly lessens the relevance of this book for me. For example, it is a pity that none of the articles in *TEXT* Special Issues 7, 8, 14, 15, 27, 28 and 30 (on research and creative writing), 13 (creativity), 6, 16, 22, and 23 (pedagogy) informed the contributors' conversation. Reference to any of them, or material in *TEXT* itself or in *New Writing*, would have removed the insularity that weakens this book.

As well, for me, the discussion appeared to be very elementary. It highlighted how far we have developed the pedagogy of creative writing in Australia and New Zealand. Australasian online journal *TEXT* has played a major role in this. The *TEXT* Special Issues supplement international series such as *New Writing Viewpoints*, providing a body of academic work for the discipline.

My viewpoint on *What We Talk about When We Talk about Creative Writing* may not please all teachers of writing; I am certain that Leahy's approach will appeal to many. However, I cannot accept that writing should be considered as an academic discipline yet show disdain for the genre of academic writing. The improvement and enhancement of this genre should be central to the teaching of writing in universities. It is not sufficient for students to be told that 'life is the central component in the creative process'; surely disciplined writing is?

Obtaining a degree that offers the prospect of financial survival is central to a student's university experience. In Australia we cannot pretend that our students will all evolve into financially successful creative writers; however, we can ensure they leave our care with writing skills and capabilities that will enable them to seek employment in a wide range of areas where these skills and capabilities are required. Our students should be able to master a range of genres, one of them being academic writing, when they graduate. When we talk about creative writing, we should make it clear that it is but one mode of writing.

Leahy's book skirts around these issues but does not engage. It is all talk and no work. That is disappointing for American teachers of creative writing. Australian and New Zealand teachers of writing are fortunate that they have access to excellent resources that are relevant and substantial and that we have developed the pedagogy of teaching writing to the extent that we have.

*Jeremy Fisher teaches writing at the University of New England,
Armidale.*

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

**General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo
& Julianne van Loon**

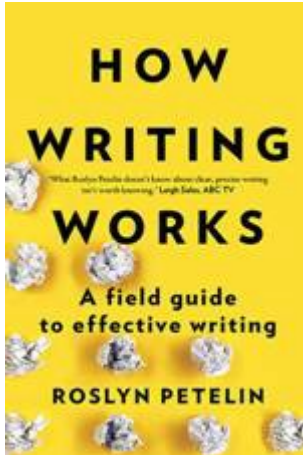
Reviews Editor: Linda Weste

text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT review

Sharpening your ‘rhetorical cutlery’

review by Rosemary Williamson



Roslyn Petelin

How Writing Works: A field guide to effective writing

Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW 2016

ISBN 9781925266917

Pb 336pp AUD39.99

A good metaphor can delight the reader, distilling as it does the author’s perception of her subject in an original way, so it is a pleasure to encounter one early on in *How Writing Works*. In the first chapter, Roslyn Petelin uses the metaphor of ‘sharp rhetorical cutlery’ for the tools writers need to produce something ‘worth reading’ (13). By using rhetorical cutlery, the writer cuts up and arranges words, tests the effect, and even tosses words off the plate before deciding that what’s offered up is worth reading and will have the intended effect. This book helps to keep the cutlery sharp and in good working order.

In other words, *How Writing Works* is a guide to writing well across a range of professional contexts. It has eleven chapters. The first provides a thought-provoking explication of writing contexts, careers and practices, and nudges the reader to action: ‘To get you started on keeping a journal, you might like to write ...’ (9). A list of activities concludes the chapter. Subsequent chapters follow this format, and like Chapter one contain plenty of bullet point lists and illustrative matter to clarify and complement content. Chapter two explores the ‘osmotic relationship’ (19) between writing and reading. (By the way, I complete one of the Chapter two activities as I write this review.) Chapters three to five interrogate writing at word, sentence and paragraph levels, and provide a grounding in grammar and punctuation. Chapter seven, on structure and design, moves to visual as well as verbal elements of writing. The next two chapters deal with genre (workplace and academic). Chapter ten has sections on established or emerging forms of digital writing, such as twitter and texting. The final chapter covers revising, editing, and proofreading. Whatever its topic, each chapter helps readers ‘to gain control’ over their

writing and produce ‘the concise, lucid, nuanced, and compelling prose that is so valued in universities and in the professions’ (ix).

Petelin states that *How Writing Works*’ intended primary audience is writers in universities and workplaces but ‘that much of the material and advice will be valuable for creative writers, who also need to be their own best editors’ (x). As somebody who bridles at the ‘academic’, ‘professional’, and ‘creative’ divide, and who advocates sensitivity to the confluences between the genres, I would recommend this book unequivocally. Petelin occasionally reminds writers of such confluences; for example, figures of speech ‘are usually regarded as the province of creative writing, but they are often present in academic and workplace writing’ (47), and some genres of academic writing ‘are also central to many government and industry workplaces’ (206). Anybody who writes, or writes to be published, must make rhetorical decisions in response to differing situations that recur within and across differing professional contexts. Creative writers striving to establish themselves professionally will find plenty in this book that is instrumental to making those decisions.

Those who teach across genres, as I do, will do well to add this book to their shelves. We can trust Petelin as an authority on writing. She co-authored *Professional Communication* (Putnis & Petelin 1996) and *The Professional Writing Guide* (Petelin & Durham 1992), both of which inform *How Writing Works*. *TEXT* readers may remember her as editor of *Australian Journal of Communication* from 1988 to 2013. Through these and other achievements, such as corporate consultancies and her highly successful WRITE101x English Grammar and Style MOOC (University of Queensland), Petelin has shown a longstanding commitment to communicating the principles of effective writing within and beyond universities. *How Writing Works* draws on her wealth of expertise.

That is not to say that the book is exhaustive or definitive. For example, workplace writers who want more on inclusive language than the summary provided in Chapter three will need to consult other sources, such as the Australian Government’s *Style Manual* (Snooks & Co. 2002), including for advice on language appropriate to Indigenous Australians. Teachers of writing may have an occasional quibble. Mine was with the section on ‘thesaurus syndrome’ (64-65), which cautions against telling students to vary nouns to maintain readers’ interest but has a caveat in my classroom, where ‘issues’ is sometimes peppered across prose made tedious by the indiscriminate and imprecise use of this word. However, such details are not symptomatic of a problem with the book, which makes no claim to be anything but introductory, but rather are symptomatic of the capacity of the book to stimulate reflection on writing and to encourage wider reading.

Petelin does draw attention to many resources for writers who want to supplement as well as sharpen their rhetorical cutlery. Many of these are online and show sensitivity to the differing needs of readers (for example, useful sites listed for revising, editing, and proofreading range from ‘chicagomanualofstyle.org’ to ‘chompchomp.com’). The book contains a list of further reading, with YouTube clips, although only for chapters one to seven. There are also many sources cited across the chapters and listed in the References for those readers wanting to advance their knowledge of writing theory and practice.

What may come as a surprise is that *How Writing Works* is also a good read, even if student or workplace writers are likely to understand some chapters more easily than others. Subject matter is selectively grounded in

rhetorical theory that is explained clearly and succinctly, and it is also richly illustrated with anecdotes, and with quotations, advice, and tips from established writers past and present, including Petelin herself. Cautionary tales are told, such as that of a company claiming millions in damages because of poor proofreading. Other writers about writing have, of course, similarly enlivened potentially dull topics, as did Lynne Truss to popular acclaim in *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (Truss 2003). Petelin sustains this approach across a range of topics yet also makes theoretical principles accessible. Despite that, the chapters on grammar will challenge some readers. They present a great deal of information that may frustrate student writers who need more extended and scaffolded grammar instruction than is possible in a book of this scope and size.

How Writing Works contains much that can inform or refresh writing and pedagogic practice and so lends itself to being set as a textbook. It achieves its aim of being ‘a substantial and engaging introduction to contemporary writing’ (ix). Having said that, it is not the only field guide to writing: Norton also publishes one, and as an e-book (Bullock et al 2013), but it is more expensive and over three times as long, and is not pitched at workplace as well as student writers. As a print book, the size, format and vivid yellow cover of *How Writing Works* make it easy to use and find on a desk. Keeping the rhetorical cutlery sharp can be a chore for some, but Petelin shows that it is worthwhile and will be made easier by having her book close by.

Works cited

Bullock, R, M Daly Goggin & F Weinberg 2013 *The Norton Field Guide to Writing with Readings and Handbook*, 4th edn, WW Norton:

<http://books.wwnorton.com/books/webad.aspx?id=4294991898> return to text

Petelin, R & M Durham 1992 *The Professional Writing Guide: Writing Well and Knowing Why*, Longman Professional, South Melbourne return to text

Putnis, P & R Petelin 1996 *Professional Communication: Principles and Applications*, Pearson Education, Sydney return to text

Snooks & Co. 2002 *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers*, 6th edn, John Wiley & Sons, Milton, Qld return to text

Truss, L 2003 *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, Profile Books, London return to text

Dr Rosemary (Rose) Williamson is Senior Lecturer and Convenor of Writing, School of Arts, University of New England. She teaches across a range of units in writing and rhetoric. Her research interests include writing pedagogy; Australian political discourse on, and press reports of, natural disaster; Australian magazine history, genres and writing; and the role of narrative in the formation of communities.

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

**General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo
& Julianne van Loon**

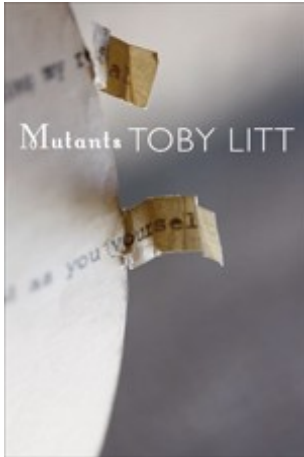
Reviews Editor: Linda Weste

text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT review

More mutation

review by Maria Tumarkin



Toby Litt

Mutants: Selected Essays

Seagull Books, Kolkata India 2016

ISBN 9780857423337

Hb 297pp USD27.50

‘Gogols of this world will always lose out to Tolstoys’, Toby Litt says on the first page of *Mutants*. He is a Gogol. Tolstoys are dependable monumentalists, Franzens of this world, let’s say, or Roths. Gogols are ‘in love with the grotesquery of paradoxical revelation’ – theirs is a world of joy-inciting contradictions and semi-tones; more often than not, Gogols write what Litt calls, in another piece, ‘headfuck fiction’: the kind that changes what it’s trying to do and how it’s doing it halfway through and then again, and / or the kind that chooses to do many, slyly interconnected things at once. Litt thinks each age celebrates its Tolstoys, and he is fine with his lot.

I was thinking that the whole Tolstoy / Gogol thing was actually far more interesting if we shift the conversation from fiction to essays. How might the Gogolification of essayistic writing – reconceiving, or reclaiming, the essay as ‘a kind of seething, perpetual mutation’ – proceed, and is it what Litt is in fact attempting in this, his first non-fiction collection?

It is hard to say because *Mutants* brings together his published pieces, forewords, afterwords, public lectures, conference papers, contributions to anthologies and catalogues as well as lectures given to his creative writing students at London’s Birkbeck College. The earliest piece comes from 2000; the latest from 2014. Which is to say that it is hard to catch Litt *at it*: he instructs, provokes, synthesises, sermonises, but not many pieces in this collection do something interesting or special as pieces of writing. Or rather Litt is a prolific writer (he discusses the term ‘prolific’ and the way it sheds and acquires meanings seemingly yearly) but he is not that interested in the kind of thinking through meaty / knotty stuff that can be

done particularly, or particularly well, in essays. Which is a shame. The thing about essayistic writing is that, when practiced in good faith, it is structurally dependent on uncertainty and instability Litt sees as crucial to good writing. Essays worthy of their name are never written backwards from a foregone conclusion. Litt's attempt at defining Great Literature – (capitals are his) and there are plenty of these definitional jogs up the mountain in the book – as 'a perfectly accomplished form of bewilderment' (20), strikes me as perfectly, uncannily suited to the essay as a form. Essayist Charles D'Ambrosio, in an interview with essayist Leslie Jamison, puts it this way:

The essay isn't a form for know-it-alls, though it's often used that way... It's kind of an article of faith for me that if you aren't taken by surprise in the process of putting words on paper then you're only writing about what you already know, you're trucking in conclusions. I need a crisis, I'm courting failure, the possibility of silence, because it's only at that moment that I actually need to find words, new words hopefully. This is a writing thing, a method, however harebrained, but it's also personal, a way of being—and they're related, I think. (D'Ambrosio qtd in Malech 2015)

This is right up Litt's alley. He is all for risks, for going *va banque*. 'A lot more will be learnt in the trying-and-failing than in the listening to reasons why not' (224), he writes and you sense that he actually means it. Litt is interested in the entanglement of knowingness with knowledge (this brings to mind Stephen Colbert's inspired 'truthiness') and in how knowingness, mistaken, willfully or otherwise, for knowledge, precludes writers from taking risks. His discussion of WG Sebald tries to strip back the knowingness. Before Sebald's death, Litt thinks the master's books are 'academic porn' (to say that about Sebald, even if in the past tense, takes guts!). In time, with the writer no longer around to produce yet another Sebaldian text, Litt comes to see Sebald's works and his legendary textual meanderings as the coming together and the coming apart of four distinctive kinds of time. Litt's essay on Kafka is both rousing and moving, as is his sleek, unpublished take-down of David Shields's overrated *Reality Hunger*.

Litt sets his sights on monumentalism (again) in his lecture on Muriel Spark. He loves Spark and considers her to be a great, overlooked writer of our era – the era fooled into worshipping false idols by its 'giganticist mentality' (except which era isn't?). 'Which novel has fitted in the most, has land-grabbed and colonised the largest area of the contemporary world?' (28) is the way we tend to identify great, lasting works of literature. Yet – yet? – Litt's non-fiction, at least the bits and pieces we encounter in *Mutants*, is marked by its own kind of giganticism. 'The greatest writers, like the greatest athletes, are capable of great precision at great speed' (21), he writes. 'With great writing we travel farther, in each sentence, than seems possible' (21). And elsewhere: 'great writing, like great art, is that which has the capacity to fascinate the future' (18). I do not see giganticism as necessarily a problem. Maybe essays should be trying to set up kiosks over the largest territory imaginable, rather than blossoming in localised, intellectually or experientially, enclaves. Yes? No? I'd love to read Litt on this.

For those of us who teach creative writing and wonder what teaching is doing to our writing and thinking (it's definitely doing *something*, that much we know), it is instructive to note that the least interesting (and at

times the most infuriatingly solipsistic) pieces in this collection involve Litt addressing his MA students – talking straight about bad writing and great writing, ‘word-processed sentences’, Souls, unique Sensibilities (capitals are his). I suspect Litt is a good teacher (maybe even a great teacher) and he may have changed a fair few of his students’ lives, but what is said behind closed classroom doors should not be republished in an essay collection. Most of us are not David Foster Wallaces and Zadie Smiths and even their stuff is borderline tolerable.

Litt is definitely worth reading. He is never boring. He has thoughts. He knows a great deal, yet – yet? – he is unafraid to say ‘I do not know!’ And even in the schtickiest passages, every time he says something it’s as if everything is on the line for him.

Works cited

Malech, D 2015 ‘An end in itself’, *Kenyon Review* (27 December):
<http://www.kenyonreview.org/2015/12/fail-better/> (accessed 28 March 2017) return to text

Maria Tumarkin is a writer and cultural historian. She holds a PhD in cultural history from the University of Melbourne, where she currently teaches creative writing. She is the author of three acclaimed books of ideas: Traumascapes, Courage and Otherland. Maria’s essays have appeared in The Best Australian Essays (2011, 2012 & 2015), Griffith Review, Meanjin, The Monthly, Kill Your Darlings, Sydney Review of Books and other publications. Her essay, No Skin, was shortlisted for the 2015 Melbourne Prize of Literature.

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo & Julianne van Loon

Reviews Editor: Linda Weste
text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT review

Prose poetry as an interface between creative genres

review by Ioana Petrescu



Jen Webb

Sentences from the Archive

Recent Work Press, Canberra ACT 2016

ISBN 9780995353800

Pb 66pp AUD12.95

The newest creative offering from writer and academic Jen Webb works on several levels to establish congruency where it might deceptively seem difficult to achieve. In her volume titled *Sentences from the Archive*, thoughts and feelings in moments of crisis are recorded through accounts of several lyrical personas, and presented in the form of prose poems because, as the author says in her Afterword, ‘they obey the logic of the sentence rather than the line’ (55).

There are several notions that need to be unpacked before one even attempts to read the poems. This volume is equally a creative, intellectual and social act of writing. Webb’s poems – which stem from Derrida’s interpretation of the etymology of the word ‘archive’ – align with the ‘jussive’ rather than the ‘sequential’ principle residing at the core of recording experience, thus opting for the syntagmatic flow of emotion over the paradigm of time. Actually, time is rarely a determining factor for the lyrical personas in this volume; they are mainly presented in the moment of their crisis, where time is suspended and the only reality is the painful event:

When the doors close against you. When your feet forget to
walk. You remember nothing about the weeks and years
before, sense has become not-sense, grief a shadow in the
corners of your day. (‘Waiting for the phone to ring III’: 13)

The poetic discourse moves into the surreal, with poems such as ‘The minutes of the meeting’ challenging everyday moments lived in realms of the protagonist’s fabrication:

There will be no phone calls, no leaving the room, till the agenda is done. And then a cat strolls in through the cracked-open door, a lizard dangling from its mouth. ... The minutes secretary hesitates: floored, flawed. A memory of blood on the walls, of lost socks trying to find their way back home. (23)

The struggle of finding the way back home, that is, to a safe place where the crisis is manageable or irrelevant, is the thought underlying the entire collection of poems. The prose poem form is a challenge; its flow is different from that of poetry, and yet it works here towards creating an interface of familiar words, thoughts and feelings in a world where only the moment feels material and the crisis is real. Time is subject to space and relativity; it is far from familiar and works against finding one's way back home, whatever that lyrical or physical home might be:

The radio clicks on and now it's good morning in Perth, where it has just hit six o'clock. In Brisbane it's mid-morning and rain is falling. ... He can't remember for a moment why he isn't home; then it comes back to him. Last chance. It is six a.m. in Perth. No one is calling his phone; the rain is still falling. ('Inside the archive I': 24)

The phone-not-ringing, as in the example above, is a recurrent symbol throughout this collection of prose poems. Another recurring symbol is that of vehicles that can (or cannot) take people to other places. Crises emerge mainly from the lack of communication or movement. However, an unexpected glimmer of hope comes from a lyrical persona that actually catches her bus and is thus offered another chance:

When she stood up to summon the bus a scrap of paper fluttered from her bag. *Milk*, it read. *Tissues*. *Firewood*. *Another chance*. The bus stopped; she stepped aboard. ('Waiting for the bus V': 48)

While a few other lyrical personas miss their buses or 'drift like smoke into history' (51), the collection ends by restoring calm after crises, which in this last poem, 'Da capo', happen to be small crises that are easily fixed. Existence is mundane here, working around a schedule prescribed by the perfect motions of the sun:

Inside is all shudder, and you need to sign that form and you find that dammit you've bought only purple garlic, not white, and the cat has trapped herself in the cupboard again, and no one has emptied the bin. (53)

It is all easily fixed 'and calm comes in with the evening light, and the sun sets, perfectly, and night curls itself around the house' (53). Whether the crises are big or small, all lyrical personas have to deal in this collection with their own sense of self and presence in an ever-challenging existence full of recurring moments that are paradoxically unpredictable due to the crisis-potential they carry. To archive all moments sequentially would mean to create linear histories, devoid of the unpredictable probability of each potentially crisis-laden moment; therefore the author chooses to archive crisis moments according to the Derridean 'jussive' principle, shaping the future through the way prose poetry is able to record and represent the past. With a graceful writerly nod to a poet, Baudelaire, the shaper of contemporary prose-poetry, and a theorist, Derrida, the shaper of

postmodernity, Webb's collection successfully marries poetry as academic creative practice with critical thought and research. The result is a very readable text that functions as an interface between poetry and prose, as well as between academy and the wider community of readers.

Dr Ioana Petrescu is a Romanian-born Australian academic and poet. She has published three books of original poetry, and more than two hundred individual poems in literary journals. She has also edited numerous collections of conference papers and creative writing, and organised poetry and poetics conferences and symposia. She teaches courses in Creative Writing at the University of South Australia and has supervised and examined numerous PhD and Honours theses in Creative Writing. Her current creative practice / research focuses on ecopoetics.

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

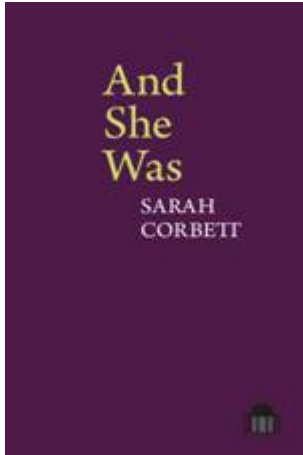
General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo & Julianne van Loon

Reviews Editor: Linda Weste
text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT review

Verse novel neo-noir

review by Linda Weste



Sarah Corbett
And She Was: A Verse-Novel
Pavilion Poetry Series
Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2015
ISBN 9781781381793
Pb 78pp GBP9.99

For a slim volume, *And She Was* has considerable weight. The verse novel boasts a university publisher, and was devised by Welsh-born poet Sarah Corbett as part of a PhD in Critical and Creative Writing at Manchester University. Yet the conviction and substance of *And She Was* derives, moreover, from the characteristics at the core of its considerable merit: its ‘experiment’ with non-linear narrative, its use of a range of poetic forms and techniques, and its engagement with film neo-noir. I found it vivid and engaging, by turns mysterious, unsettling, surprising and sensuous.

And She Was conveys its central themes of memory, love, loss and identity through two dream-like narratives; first, the relationship between new lovers Esther and Iain, and second, Felix Morning’s search for clues to his former life. In combination, the narratives encourage readers to consider ‘the way we encounter and reconfigure ourselves through trauma, in desire, or as we seek to reassemble ourselves and our past’ (cover).

The recuperation of story is necessarily elusive; the choice of achronological events and neo-noir emphases – shadowy settings, character ambivalence, visual disorientation – evokes a mood of uncertainty and cynicism, perhaps even fatalism.

Corbett’s poetic techniques are similarly flexible and apt to their purpose: there are stanzas of stepped lines to propel the narrative breathlessly forward; shorter lyrics to punctuate that intensity; a heart-shaped poem and locket declaration offering double signification; fluid line breaks and shifting forms to capture labile psychological states – amnesia, psychosis,

breakdown, hallucination and emotional extremes; in each instance, the affordances of Corbett's choices are apparent, with the result that the dual delivery of poetry and narrative is vital and urgent.

The verse novel is organised into three sections, beginning with the beguiling 'Nocturne in Three Movements' which comprises the poems E Major, C Major and E Minor, and a further poem, 'The Train'. These first thirteen pages foreground filmic and lyric influences, while the narrative is episodic, unstable, illusory. This is a different approach to many verse novels which at their outset, signal their plot imperatives, and thus temporally-anchor their story, setting and characters. Taking a phrase from a Talking Heads song lyric, E Major begins the romance with the incantatory line that is also the title of the book.

And she was
Grist to his mill
And he was
Grit to her pearl (2)

This patterning of syntax continues over two and a half pages. At first running the risk of appearing trite and obvious, these sometime-idioms employed in the service of poetry work to convey how romantic sentiment can wear thin, as indeed it does in the case of Iain and Esther. The lines go on to develop into highly individualised and often disruptive responses that eschew sentimental or predictable imagery, for instance, 'A glass blown from the lips of a child', 'A grain grinding at his stone' and 'In the mouth of shell / An ear with an itch' (3).

In 'C Major', a poem of ten stanzas of eight lines, the phrases 'And she was' and 'And he was' advance the plot, hence 'midsummer and they took off north / to the coast' ... And she was / burnt by the wind and he was stung by a fish / and she was sick after oysters and he was (5). As the verse novel develops, these short phrases persist for various ends: to create rhythm; oftentimes to suspend the narrative in lyric word and sound play; and just as frequently, to wrench the focus back.

and she was mouse to his nook and he was
crumb to her bird and she was nibble to his
neck and was nip to her cat and she was
purr to his roar and he was loop to her needle
and she was knit to his purl and he was
fold to her furl and she was nip to his tuck
and he was to hers. And she was a horse
kicking up the white tips of his ocean (6)

Winter was a spell spoken at solstice
breathed on glass and scratched in ice
when the boiler broke at Christmas. They lit
a fire in the hearth window open for the smoke
that set off alarms and the neighbours.
And they drank whiskey and they smoked dope
and she wore his jumpers and he wore her tights
and just to keep warm they made love all night (6)

While the continuity of the phrase 'and she was' throughout the verse novel provides an anchor of syntactical stability, its incantation also offers up the relationship's mood and tone, from its exciting beginnings through its waning to its decline.

...

and they ran out of talk and they ran out of money
 and she was just a bit on edge and he was
 just a bit off-colour and she had an itch
 and he had a headache and they had a fight
 over nothing and couldn't resolve it.
 And he needed a job and she needed a job
 and the banks crashed and there were no jobs.

And he was meat to her trap and she was
 noose to his neck and he was cross to her bird
 and she was salt to his flay and he was
 douse to her flame and she was nick to his
 knife and he was pain to her butt and he was
 gripe to her gut and she was sick one morning
 and she was tired. She was not so sure any more
 and he thought maybe he'd dreamed her after-all. (7)

The second section takes up the narrative of Felix Morning. He wakes with no memory in a side street. In his pocket is a membership card for a nightclub called The Bunker. Under his name is the moniker 'The Runner'. He has no idea what it means. He enlists the help of the beautiful Flick to trace his past. The ensuing series of events are ephemeral, often surreal; as if the protagonist is hallucinating, thus the titles of the individual poems in this section, namely 'The Café', 'Flick', 'The Garden', 'The Shower', 'The Bunker', 'The Dance', 'The Kiss', 'The Fit', 'The Key', and 'Place of the Lost Things' are of considerable use to the reader to track this character, settings and story. The first poem in this section 'The Café' comprises sixteen stanzas of four lines in a stepped stanza, a form Corbett devised 'as a way to narrate and at the same time maintain the lyric tension' (Corbett 2017):

On a side street in the gap before dawn
 a man lies in a puddle of overcoat
 left like a prop from the night's show,
 a man thrown from another world. (16)

...

In a basement window a sign for *Café Open* buzzes on.
 In neon a spidery giant flapping bat wings,
 hair spikes, eye pits, mouth cave where
 fear
 is an over-coat on his tongue. (16)

...

Booths in red plastic shine under chandeliers
 glittery with grease and bodies of flies.
 A menu wedged between salt and pepper
 says *Stan's* in gothic script. (17)

...

a black plastic card printed: Felix Morning
 below a face he almost remembers
 before remembering fades. The name
 is an adder striking the heart of
 him. (17)

Stan taps the card with a nicotine talon.
 'No worry, Mr Felix, this card pays'.
 'Do you know me?' Voice an egg

cracking in his throat. 'We wait

(17)

for Felix; 'The Café' waits. You are the switch'.

Chandeliers cast rainbow prisms,
he cannot feel the chair beneath him.
This is some weird shit. (17)

He should feed the body with which he has affinity.

He is empty as a well after a long drought,
an echo doubling back on him
so that he is echo's question. (18)

In the third section, the respective narratives of Iain and Esther, and Felix Morning 'the Runner' are presented in tandem; each to continue its recursive obsessions. The poem 'Pinkie' raises the narrative stakes even as the verse novel nears its end, with Esther's propensity to test the boundaries of love reaching dangerous extremes. Corbett's intention that in places the poetics 'should be quite woozy to read' (Corbett 2017) is here darkly brought to the fore.

What actually takes place in *And She Was*? Though the reader may not be entirely sure, there is nevertheless much to admire in this verse novel's stylistic richness, its condensed incident and drama, and in the audacity of its experiment.

Works cited

Corbett, S 2017 Interview with Linda Weste (11 January) return to text

Linda Weste won the 2016 Wesley Michel Wright Prize for excerpts from her historical verse novel Nothing Sacred. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Melbourne.

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

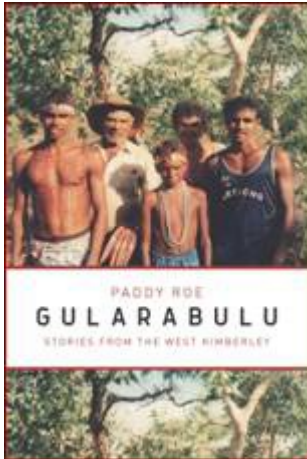
General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo & Julianne van Loon

Reviews Editor: Linda Weste
text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT review

Talking Country

review by Jeanine Leane



Paddy Roe
Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley
Stephen Muecke (ed) Introduction
UWAP, Perth WA 2016
ISBN 9781742589275
Pb 152pp AUD22.99

Gularabulu is a collection of nine stories told by Nyigina Elder, Paddy Roe, from Broome and transcribed, as spoken to settler academic, Professor Stephen Muecke, in the late 1970s. Its publication in 1983 was groundbreaking as it invited the settler, as a respectful listener into the rich history and stories of the Country of the West Kimberley. Paddy Roe, as an Elder and respected storyteller explains up front:

*This is all public.
You know it is for every one
Children, women, anybody
See, tis thing they used to tell us
Story, and we know*

This is an invitation for the settler reader to step outside their socio-cultural moorings and enter into the Country of Aboriginal storytelling that is the living history of a place and people with an unbroken connection to the land, the elements and natural features through the telling and retelling of story. Paddy Roe's invitation to readers, spoken with the authority of a senior law-man, is a living testimony to the resilience of Aboriginal culture through stories of memory, place, people and all life forms that inhabit the space of *Gularabulu*. Stories cannot be stolen and stories are the life-blood, the un-severed umbilical cord that continues to connect Aboriginal Australians to Country and people despite ongoing colonial theft of land and oppression. Because Aboriginal knowledge and experience was not distilled and put into books and placed on shelves, storytelling *is* education and cultural transmission, that as Paddy's

movements will show, was combined with work such as gathering for women, or, in this case, the making of tools, hence the rasping sounds that Muecke records while Paddy is working and talking. Such background noise and movements are not just important but essential to the context of the stories.

Between the first publication of *Gularabulu* in 1983 and its re-release in 2016, influential Torres Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata coined the term the 'Cultural Interface' (Nakata 2002: 281). The Cultural Interface is the space that settlers and Indigenous people inhabit in a colonial situation that is neither an entirely 'Aboriginal world' or an entirely 'Settler world' and, *a place of tension that requires constant negotiation*. It is within this post-invasion space requiring constant negotiation that *Gularabulu* originates. Muecke is invited into unfamiliar territory as a representative of the settler world. The same privilege is extended to the reader.

Central to *Gularabulu* is the locale – the West Kimberley – Paddy Roe's Country. *Gularabulu* is an area along the northwest coast of Western Australia from La Grange in the south, stretching through Broome and Dampier Land in the north. But its vastness and vibrancy, brought to life through Paddy's stories overwrites the more recent colonial nomenclature.

Gularabulu occurs in the space of many complex interfaces and involves a series of negotiations between Aboriginal and settler cultures. The beginning premise of the negotiation that became *Gularabulu* is that Muecke is privileged. As a respected storyteller Paddy has a responsibility to a community of listeners, as do all Aboriginal storytellers.

Gularabulu is a series of negotiations where the Aboriginal negotiator decides what will be shared and how. It begins with the most generous negotiation of all – Aboriginal English – not just within the pages of *Gularabulu* but also within Australia itself. Its invention and continued use as a mode of communication between Aboriginal peoples of different nations brought into contact through colonial dispersion and dispossession and between Aboriginal people and settlers is a testimony to its importance as the language that subtends the space between two very different cultures. Without it this space would be an unbridgeable chasm.

In *Gularabulu* Aboriginal English comes alive with the Country as the living language it is and Paddy Roe's use of it brings to the fore the innovative and pivotal role it plays in the sharing of Aboriginal stories of Country, history and experience. When Muecke is invited into the Country of *Gularabulu* through story his role is that of the respectful listener, a visitor who is welcomed to Paddy Roe's Country through its stories.

As Stephen listens he is taken across a cultural border, one of many, into what western rationalists label the supernatural, but for Paddy Roe and his people it is reality – the beings that inhabit the Country of his stories are as real as the teeming meat-ants trekking endlessly across the red dirt or the shifting winds that rattle through the acacias or the rolling swirling horizons. We meet a form-shifting maban who undergoes animal transformations; a devil with the head of a donkey and the tail of a dog and the Wurrawurra spirit woman who can turn herself into natural elements such as grass – beings that are beyond the visual field of western reason, categorisations and linear time – but past and present are continuous and all times are alive in the Country of *Gularabulu*. Paddy Roe assures us Wurrawurra Women 'still lives today' (64); or in relation to the sightings of a mysterious Donkey-Devil by women and children, 'Something live in

this country you know' (93). Beings require no further explanation and move across the Country of Gularbulu as easily as Paddy Roe and his people do. The reader is also aware that there are many presences on Paddy Roe's Country that are still beyond our visual field – only Paddy Roe and his kinsfolk can read them.

This is the space of forgoing and unlearning western modes of history and knowledge transmission. Paddy distinguishes between three different types of story. There is *trustori* – stories that can be located in time and space and within the memory of the storyteller; *Bugarrigarri* – stories from the Dreaming and *devilstori* – stories of demons, spirits and ghosts. As the stories unfold to reveal the rich and complex story of the Country and people western history is erased and Muecke listens without questions, comments or interruptions because stories told in this space are not to be questioned or judged. They are told because they *are*. Nothing is retrospective. All times are.

The reader becomes aware through Paddy's narrative that there are other listeners present too, besides Stephen Muecke. For example when Paddy is telling of the Wurrawurra Woman he pauses mid narration to ask Stephen if he is comfortable with another listener, Joe Butcher smoking. Stephen responds; 'Oh that's OK' and Paddy continues; or, during the *devilstori* 'Donkey Devil' Paddy defers to a young girl:

'...donkey earhole and nose like a dog'
Young Girl: *Dog*. (92)

Beyond this, all listeners are silent unless spoken to because as Stephen and other listeners demonstrate this is an important protocol in Aboriginal storytelling.

The form of *Gularabulu* also moves beyond the limits of western academic convention that tends to distance the listener from the speaker as interviewer and interviewee. This is first established through the first name basis that is deployed throughout the work to distinguish between different speakers, in particular, Paddy and Stephen. Beyond this, the visual appearance of the text on the page blurs the lines between western literary and historical categorisations of fiction / nonfiction, or poetry or extended prose and song. Paddy's stories combine all such forms and he alternates between them as adeptly as he moves across Country. Stephen's transcription is faithful to the flow, the pauses the hesitations and the long extended sounds such as growls that are integral to the stories being told.

Paddy expressed to Stephen that his reason for extending these stories of his Country to a settler audience was that 'they might see us better than before' (5). Indeed, readers of *Gularabulu* will see, hear and feel many things that they had not experienced before. Thirty-three years after its original release *Gularabulu* should be read as a seminal intra-cultural exchange that subverted or at least suspended the existing colonial power structure of the conventional western academy. In its place a shared space of inter-subjectivity between black and white emerged from which a deeper, layered and more nuanced history of the West Kimberley could be heard. Conventional western historical methods and theories are erased from these living stories of place.

Works cited

Nakata, M 2002 'Indigenous Knowledge and the Cultural Interface: underlying issues at the intersection of knowledge and information systems', *IFLA Journal* 28, 5: 281-292
return to text

Jeanine Leane is a Wiradjuri writer, poet, teacher and academic from the Murrumbidgee River. She teaches Creative Writing and Aboriginal Literature at the University of Melbourne. Walk Back Over, her second volume of poetry, will be released in 2017 (Cordite Books).

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo & Julianne van Loon

Reviews Editor: Linda Weste

text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT review

Dreams of waking

review by Ruby Todd



Michelle Cahill

Letter to Pessoa & other short fictions

Giramondo Publishing Company, Artarmon NSW 2016

ISBN 9781925336146

Pb 247pp AUD24.95

In his riddling, labyrinthine story, ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ (1962), Jorge Luis Borges imagines a fantasy world of ideas created by a secret order of scholars in which, he writes, it is believed ‘that while we sleep here [on Earth], we are awake elsewhere and that in this way every man is two men’ (Borges 1962: 8). In this image of alternate dream-lives and divided selves, Borges speaks to some of the most pervasive themes in *Letter to Pessoa*, the first collection of lyrical and inventive short stories by Indian-Australian poet Michelle Cahill. The significance of dreaming in this collection – as a practical and metaphorical means of escaping, extending or interrogating reality – is also premised by the book’s elusive epigraph, an excerpt from Fernando Pessoa’s *The Book of Disquiet*: ‘I feel as if I’m always on the verge of waking up’.

In Cahill’s story, ‘The Lucid Krishna’, a psychoanalyst experiences a lucid dream in which she ‘is half-aware that her curved body is dreaming the excerpts in which she is a fragment’ (31). From her position in the dream, the psychoanalyst ponders the origins of Krishna, her dream companion, and suggests that the borders between waking life and dreaming are more ambiguous than they might first appear:

Was it yesterday they met in the other life? Was he the guy in the elevator, talking all the way up to the twenty-third floor? These days she pays increasingly less attention to her waking hours. (35-6)

Dreaming, as a mode of experience and as an idea, recurs in this collection as a wild, disruptive force which troubles distinctions between not only

reality and dreams but also more broadly, between objective and subjective experience, fact and fiction, action and ideas, and life and art. In 'Borges and I', arguably the stand-out story in this collection and certainly the most ambitious, Cahill offers an impressively intricate Borgesian pastiche which is also metafictional – the narrator Wesley Burns, a physicist breaking new ground in spacetime theory, becomes obsessed with Borges's stories to the extent that he begins to cede his own identity to that of the author. At the same time, Borges's fictional reality – specifically that of the abovementioned story 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' – begins to infiltrate Wesley's own life and research in Colorado, including his dreams. Cahill creates an absorbing philosophical maze in this story, with multiple uncanny resonances between the narrator's reality as a physicist exploring the limits of time and space, and his gradual possession by the Borgesian universe. As Wesley explains of his experience in reading Borges, '[i]t was as if the secret apertures of time had unlocked, as pages within pages tunnelled through ancient and obscure worlds' (121).

As writers whose work shares many of Cahill's own preoccupations, it seems fitting that both Borges and Pessoa are among the authors who, in various iterations, haunt these stories. As the book's title intimates, the central literary conceit which connects many of Cahill's stories is of a first-person narrator who addresses a diverse cohort of literary luminaries in the form of letters or dramatic monologues. For this reason, *Letters to Pessoa* as a collection is not only unashamedly literary in nature and style, but also assumes and demands a similarly literary audience in order for many of its allusions and framings to translate. Pessoa, Virginia Woolf, Jacques Derrida, JM Coetzee, Jean Genet, Tadeusz Różewicz, and even Neil Young are all addressed in letters, their ghostly presences invoked in the second person 'you' by a succession of confessional voices – some of which impress as versions of Cahill's own. In 'Letter to J.M. Coetzee', it is the voice of the living version of Coetzee's own character, Melanie Isaacs, that is heard. For the most part, the performative first-person mode of address in these pieces lends immediacy and urgency to Cahill's lyrical prose, when searching, fervent narrators speak of their ordinary lives and of their lived experience of literature in the same breath. In one such piece, 'Letter to Virginia Woolf', Cahill writes with intensity as her narrator imagines Woolf's final moments:

Dear V, / Some mornings the light burns a hole in my eyes
that I call living. I think of you filling your pockets with
river stones, one for every unwritten book, one for Vanessa,
one for Leonard and one for Vita. This happens when my
daughter is away and the whole house swells like a tidal
shore. Through the plate glass windows leaf shadows
flicker on the shiny parquet floor. (25)

These narrators who address living and dead writers across continents and decades testify to the capacity of a text's felt life to enter the nervous systems of its readers, of authorial personas to inhabit the living, and of literature to alter reality in personal as well as public spheres. Other writers inhabit this collection without being addressed in this epistolary style, appearing instead as characters or as reference points within a wider narrative. In 'Chasing Nabokov', an irreverent young woman named Lo narrates her sexual encounters with a character named Vladimir Nabokov, who shares striking similarities with the real Nabokov despite the fact that both he and Lo live in Sydney. To my mind, despite the initial intrigue of its premise, this story falls short of its surreal, satirical promise, betraying too often its contrivance. Elsewhere, the poets Philip Larkin and Federico

García Lorca are recalled in suggestive references throughout ‘Aubade for Larkin’ and ‘Duende’ respectively. Both are carefully-measured third-person narratives which explore themes of love and mortality in the lives of two gay couples.

For many of Cahill’s first-person narrators, reality is experienced as tenuous, ambiguous and shifting – precisely because they are also writers, who create alternate realities as well as commune with the created realities of other writers. For these narrators, the experience and concept of objective reality is complicated by their inhabitation of created worlds that so often feel more vivid than the concrete external world. Similarly, in a gesture common to both Borges and Pessoa, Cahill frequently troubles the notion of a stable, continuous identity or self, specifically the notion of a writer’s identity as being comprised of two selves by no means at ease with each other – the one who ‘lives’ and the one who writes. As Borges writes in ‘Borges and I’, the famous short text whose title Cahill borrows for one of her own stories: ‘I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me’ (Borges 1964).

This sense of a divided self, allegorised in the multiple literary personas of not only Borges but of Pessoa and of Cahill herself, speaks of the conflict between life and art, and converges with the question, implicit in many of Cahill’s stories, of the costs and justifications of creation. In the journal-like ‘Letter to Tadeusz Rózewicz’, a melancholic first person narrator, whose life appears to parallel Cahill’s own, confesses to the Polish writer her ongoing struggles with living and writing: ‘...I discovered I was little more than a wreckage of three manuscripts, each one craving my attention, devouring me’ (224). ‘Is it real, this work?’ asks the narrator, ‘[i]s all my labour wasted, a prostitution, a slow destruction? Will I be set free?... Is it unassailable as death then, this fate of being a slave to signification?’ (230). In ‘Duende’, this monstrous potential of art to entrap and devour its creators is intimated when one of the characters, upon learning of his lover’s apparent drowning, tells his friend, ‘I’m convinced Carlos, there’s a mutilation to art which can’t be named’ (53).

Despite this apprehension of art’s danger and constriction, Cahill also continually attests to the ways that the urge to go on creating, and the joys in doing so, persist regardless – as implied in ‘Letter to Virginia Woolf’: ‘But maybe I cannot live without words. Each one maddening as a stone thrown into the river ... breaking the mirror of this world before it remakes [it] and I see with clarity’ (29). Throughout this collection’s evocative and wide-ranging stories, Cahill reminds us of the visceral ways in which experiencing the world through its recreation on the page – be it the literature of other minds or the literature we ourselves strive to make – is itself a means of dreaming, and a way in which (to recall Borges) we might each be granted access to life through a lens of many selves.

Works cited

Borges, JL 1962 ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, trans James E Irby, *Yale University School of Art*: art.yale.edu/file_columns/0000/0066/borges.pdf (accessed 19 March 2017) return to text

Borges, JL 1964 [1962] ‘Borges and I’, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, trans James E Irby, *Swarthmore College Computer Society*: <https://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/users/00/pwillen1/lit/borg&i.htm> (accessed 19 March 2017) return to text

Ruby Todd is a writer of prose and poetry, with a PhD in Creative Writing and Literary Theory from Deakin University, where she teaches. Her current research investigates the connections between elegy, ethics and ecology.

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

**General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo
& Julianne van Loon**

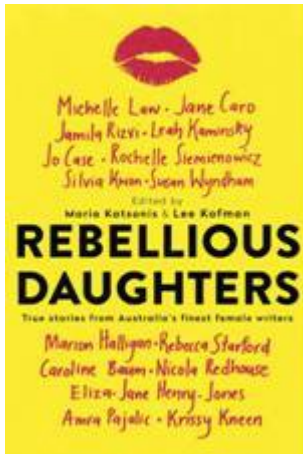
Reviews Editor: Linda Weste

text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT review

Wonder tales

review by Jessica Gildersleeve



Rebellious Daughters: True Stories from Australia's Finest Female Writers
Maria Katsonis and Lee Kofman (eds)
Ventura Press, Paddington NSW 2016
ISBN 9781925183528
Pb 325pp AUD32.99

In her contribution to Maria Katsonis and Lee Kofman's collection, *Rebellious Daughters: True Stories from Australia's Finest Female Writers* (2016), Krissy Kneen cites fairy-tale scholar Marina Warner, who notes that the original term for the fairy tale was *Wundermärchen*, the wonder tale. 'To wonder', writes Warner, 'communicates the receptive state of marvelling as well as the active desire to know, to inquire' (40). In the same way, Kneen observes, the (often horrific) fairy tales told to her by her grandmother, stories which did not at all adhere to the philosophy of characters who lived 'happily ever after', filled the young girl 'with a powerful and dangerous curiosity' (40). It is that desire to know, that epistemophilia, which not only drives the women and girls of the stories collected here, but those about whom they read, and whom we now, in this collection, voraciously follow, hungry for knowledge, for endings happy or otherwise.

Rebellious Daughters comprises contributions from seventeen emerging and established Australian women writers, including recent major award winners Kneen (Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize 2014), Michelle Law (Queensland Premier's Young Publishers and Writers Award 2016), and Leah Kaminsky (Voss Literary Prize 2016). The tales are not short stories as such, but more often take the form of the memoir (a genre in which many of these writers already work) or personal essay, drawing on the angst-filled journals of the writers' teenaged selves and reflecting on the ways in which these processes and periods of rebellion fit into the broader histories of their own lives and those of their families. It is often seen to be a dangerous assumption that women's writing is always already about their own lives, whereas writing by men is seen to be 'universal'. However, in

Katsonis and Kofman's collection, to write the self is to claim it, concomitant with the process of growing up, of becoming woman. Indeed, as Rebecca Starford makes clear, 'I couldn't write my story as fiction. For me, the act of writing a memoir was important to the process. If I'd written my experiences as fiction, I would have been hiding behind the genre, and that would have been self-defeating, less courageous, and less honest' (156).

Some of the tales included are more simply about the self, the 'becoming self'. Others reflect on the roles the women have played and continue to play, or which change, even simply switch with others, throughout their lives, as when a daughter becomes a mother – to her own child (as in Rochelle Siemienowicz's 'Resisting the Nipple', Jane Caro's 'Where Mothers Stop and Daughters Start', and Nicola Redhouse's 'The Peacock House') or, as in Eliza-Jane Henry-Jones's 'Just Be Kind' and Amra Pajalic's 'Nervous Breakdowns', becoming mother to one's own parent. Often in the stories this takes the form of Carl Jung's mother complex, a 'resistance to maternal supremacy', Siemienowicz quotes, in which one's motto is '[a]nything, so long as it is not like Mother!' (285). It is also, however, a theme common to the many stories which reflect on the demands of ill or dying parents, or those of migrant parents who have often suffered hardship and trauma and invest utterly in the expectations of their luckier children.

As such, rebellion takes a range of forms in these stories – sometimes as serious as lengthy and intentional separation from the suffocations of those parents (in Caroline Baum's 'Estranged'), and sometimes as simple as a clandestine visit to the home of a romantic crush (in Law's 'Joyride'): 'I didn't want Liam', Law reflects. 'What I'd actually wanted was freedom. And something as simple, as unremarkable, and perhaps laughable, as a solo bike ride' (272). The term 'good girl' rings as a key note throughout the tales: to be the good girl, the stories repeat, is to deny the self; to rebel is to find the self. Often, too, it is the sisters of those good girls who act as foils, as reminders of other ways of being, of rebellion as freedom (as in Marion Halligan's 'Daughters of Debate' and Jamila Rizvi's 'The Good Girl').

Where the stories are perhaps most interesting is when the rebellion of one woman enables the rebellion of another, offering them freedom and independence. Halligan's younger sisters are permitted to ride their bicycles because of her own decisive act in refusing their father's orders. And in Silvia Kwon's 'Looking for Happiness in Australia' it is the daughter's pursuit of an alternative way of life from that which was expected of her South Korean foremothers which offers her own mother the possibility of independence from her oppressive husband. Kwon's insistence on her mother's own engagement with the community, rather than relying on her daughter as translator and mediator, gives the older woman the confidence to leave her husband and shape her own life. Rebellion, the story reminds us, is not just for the young: it is a continuing act which, over and over, enables the freedom of choice for the women in these stories, not just those writing them. 'This is the way with fairy tales' – with wonder tales – as Kneen puts it: 'the tellers die but the stories live on in each subsequent generation' (42).

To see the stories as simply a collection of tales of 'going wild', of 'good girls gone bad', of smoking and shoplifting and sex, is to miss the story of the rebel as the story of the pathfinder, the explorer. Just as the tale of Bluebeard, Kneen notes, depicts the young wife who comes to see 'the

world as it really is instead of blindly accepting a fabrication of reality' (42), so too the women of these stories follow alternative narratives. If these daughters are modern figures of Cordelia, as Baum's father laments, then, it is Cordelia as one who sees the truth and is unafraid to speak it. These Cordelias, these Bluebeard's wives, these good girls and their mothers 'marvel' at the world, but more importantly, they inquire of it. It is in that pursuit of knowledge that they are most rebellious, and most brave.

Jessica Gildersleeve is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Southern Queensland. She is the author of Elizabeth Bowen and the Writing of Trauma: The Ethics of Survival (Brill/Rodopi 2014), as well as essays on other twentieth- and twenty-first-century women writers, including Rosamond Lehmann, Jean Rhys, Agatha Christie, Sarah Waters, and Pat Barker. She is co-editor of Queensland Review and associate editor of Hecate. Christos Tsiolkas: The Utopian Vision, Don't Look Now, and Memory and the Wars on Terror: Australian and British Perspectives (ed with Richard Gehrman) are all forthcoming this year.

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo & Julianne van Loon

Reviews Editor: Linda Weste
text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT review

Offerings in exchange

review by Nicholas Jose



The Near and the Far: New Stories from the Asia-Pacific Region

David Carlin & Francesca Rendle-Short (eds)

Scribe Publications, Brunswick VIC 2016

ISBN 9781925321562

Pb 271pp AUD27.99

The Near and the Far presents work in prose and poetry by twenty-one authors who participated in RMIT's Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange project from 2014. Activities included residencies in Penang, Hoi An and the Yarra Valley where creative writing was produced in solitude in the morning and shared with the group in the afternoon. Apart from the power and beauty of the individual works, the collection has the larger interest of the process, showing what can happen when creativity is prompted, provoked and nurtured in circumstances that are designed in a considered way but also expect the unexpected. This is new work 'from the Asia-Pacific Region', a peculiar but seemingly unavoidable bit of nomenclature, used more in Australia than elsewhere, to indicate a geo-political inclusiveness of which Australia desires to be part and a pragmatic flexibility about whether the designation refers to the writer or the story. Many of the authors and their stories are in fact mobile across this notional space, open to new possibilities, as Alice Pung notes in her foreword.

The WrICE process, then, involves taking writers out of their comfort zone and into new cultural situations, both physically and in terms of connections within the group, and turning up the creative heat. The work shows the signs of that pressure in its energy and urgency, its apparent randomness or instability, its sense of saying something from somewhere. And for all the variety there's a shared concern with self-realisation, with knowledge and freedom. Those who seem to have followed the rules closely – write in the morning, present in the afternoon – have a special power, starting with Melissa Lucashenko's great opener, 'Dreamers', where the axe comes down to complete both a complex emotional drama

and a classically tight short story in one final stroke at the end. Other writers follow the workshop rules to similarly empowering effect: Laura Stortenbeker's 'Floodlit', Suchen Christine Lim's 'My Two Mothers', Omar Musa's 'You Think You Know', Jhoanna Lynn B Cruz's 'Comadrone', Maxine Beneba Clarke's 'Aviation' and Jennifer Down's 'We Got Used to Here Fast' among them. The well-made story is back, even in this most experimental place. For other writers the pressure seems to have had a centrifugal effect, encouraging more overt experimentality and a constellation of fragments that are held together by the intensity of personal experience: 'M' by Amarlie Foster does this, as does 'Standing in the Eyes of the World' by Bernice Chauly, 'Hidden Things' by Harriet McKnight and 'Some Hints About Travelling to the Country Your Family Departed' by Laurel Fantauzzo, and the ingeniously crafted pieces by each of the editors, Francesca Rendle-Short's '1:25,000' and David Carlin's 'Unmade in Bangkok'. The poets too – Melody Paloma in 'A Letter in Three Parts or More', Nyein Way in 'Treatise on Poetry' and Nguyen Bao Chan in 'Three Poems' – turn the fluidity of their medium into a way of joining disparate things together. 'Inside out. Outside in. Mix. Mix. Mix' (157), writes Nyein Way.

This is only way one to read the anthology. Another is to notice the transmission across the generations, as a creative and pedagogical practice. Maxine Beneba Clarke writes that 'the mix of emerging, early career and established authors made the group seem like a family of writers' (235). 'I saw how authors at different stages of their careers and from different countries came to grips with the writing process' (208), echoes Jhoanna Lynn B Cruz, who teaches at the University of the Philippines in Mindanao. WrICE balances the aloneness of the writing vocation with a sense of a community that helps build conviction in the writer and strength in the work. It is good to see long-term advocates for the potential of creative writing in the region sharing their skills, including colleagues from the Asia Pacific Writers and Translators network such as Robin Hemley, who writes a cross-cultural father-daughter perspective in 'The Diplomat's Child', Alvin Pang, looking to a pan-cultural future in his story 'The Illoi of Kantimeral', and Xu Xi with a wittily crafted memoir, 'BG: The Significant Years'. Time is a recurrent theme, even an obsession, in this volume, as writers look forward and back, and consider their position in the pulse of time – 'the obsessed train of time' (175) in Nguyen Bao Chan's phrase.

The Near and the Far invites us to consider the project and the process in the same way that an exegetical reflection can contextualise interpretation of a creative work. In their introduction the editors emphasise the dimension of exchange: the writers 'are offering the gift of their culture in its rawest, roughest form ... fresh and unfinished ... written just that morning' (6). The question of what to write about in such a setting can be a pressure. How do you respond when representative status is conferred on you? 'Openness', 'unease', 'risk-taking' are some of the potentially ambivalent feelings that come with the experience. As the authors reflect on what it was like to participate, some describe finding the story they need to tell through the 'vulnerability' of being away from home. There is commentary on WrICE at the end of the book, and detailed biographies of each author. All of this directs attention to what we might learn from the undertaking as a whole, as writers and pedagogues as well as readers, and what larger commonalities, discontinuities and, generally, issues there might be.

‘Australia is often uneasy about its neighbours’ (257), Omar Musa writes. And our neighbours can feel the same. And it’s not always easy to tell. ‘You Think You Know’ is the title of Omar Musa’s story about a man the narrator meets on a bus on the way to Penang. But you don’t always know, and don’t always know when you don’t. Cate Kennedy reflects on this form of ‘unease’ in ‘Incoming Tides’, a meditation on her experience in Vietnam, which ‘brought with it many thoughts about silences, miscommunications, and untold stories’ (140). This can beckon a writer, from a deeper motive, even, than the writing, which is the hope of recognising ‘a familiar face across the medium of the page’ (141).

Perhaps that’s what inspires some of the Australian writers to turn back to where they come from as part of this experience. Joe Rubbo puts this honestly: ‘I wasn’t immersing myself. The opposite. I was removing myself from this many-textured place [Hoi An]...’ (75) in writing ‘Trampoline’, a short story set in the suburban Australia of his childhood. ‘[It] felt right... A refraction of the world I came from’ (76). Harriet McKnight takes that further: ‘A great deal of the history of my country is wretched and cursed. But everywhere are stories pressed down into the earth like the sediment layers of rock’ (102). She writes one of those stories, ‘something planted in another country altogether but which serves as a marker of me, here’ (102). It is not the only time in the book that a story pressed down underfoot is retrieved and told. It is the gift and power of literature to do so. Here the set-up of *The Near and the Far* compresses time and space in a way that forces new kinds of utterance. It creates a welcome revealing composite of our place and moment – an array of searching, sweaty, breath-stopping, boldly crafted exchange offerings.

Nicholas Jose has published seven novels, three collections of short stories, a memoir and essays, mostly on Australian and Asian culture. He is Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at Bath Spa University and Professor of English and Creative Writing at The University of Adelaide.

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo & Julianne van Loon

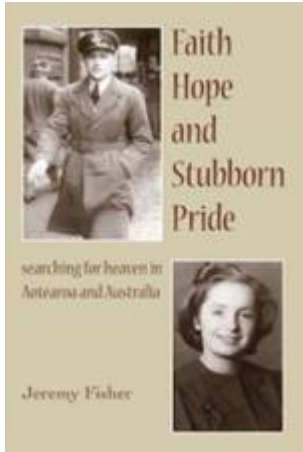
Reviews Editor: Linda Weste

text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT review

Illuminating family stories

review by Noeline Kyle



Jeremy Fisher

Faith, Hope and Stubborn Pride:

Searching for heaven in Aotearoa and Australia

Fat Frog Books, Sydney 2016

ISBN 9780959035087

Pb 144pp AUD27.95

Jeremy Fisher set out to ‘provide a simple chronology of my family’ but believed he lacked the knowledge to do the story justice. His forbears, however, left considerable markers for the family historian and, given their standing in various non-conformist churches, there was much for the historian to find in church, archival and other genealogical sources. To add to the ‘illumination’ of the story Fisher uses some fiction, combining this with his non-fiction narrative. Given recent debates on the relative merits of using fiction in history, Fisher’s reasoning has resonance here:

The work stands as an example of writing practice combining fiction and non-fiction techniques. What I wanted to demonstrate was that biography, history and fiction can co-exist in narrative. I have not muddled the waters by trying to combine them, as I have in other of my written works. (viii)

The use of fiction is situated so that the reader is in no doubt that it has been used as a device to ‘imagine’ and ‘illuminate’ when historical data does not do so to the author’s satisfaction. As early as the mid-1990s Drusilla Modjeska wrote her ‘fictional’ biography of her mother, noting for the reader:

When I began this book my intention was to write a biography of my mother and I expected that I would keep to the evidence ... (but) ... to stick only to the facts seemed

to deny the fictional paradox of truthfulness, and the life that the book was demanding. (Modjeska 1996: 317)

Creative non-fiction has since become a well-worked genre and the subject of continuing debate among historians, novelists and contemporary critics.

Fisher's use of fiction in *Faith, Hope and Stubborn Pride* descends lightly on the narrative and its placement at the beginning of some chapters makes for a useful juxtaposition against the historically-researched narrative which follows. My one reservation here would be, that for the general reader, it is not always possible to know who one is reading about without jumping forward to scan the historical text. For example, the fictional piece 'caught in the searchlight', is an absorbing read, but one has no clue as to its relevance unless one reads the next section and then peruses the family lineage to link the individual to the family story.

Writing a family story almost always faces the same problem. There are too many people over too many years for the general reader to make sense of them. The best family stories are written along the edges or have a story that steers a unique passage through that ancestral forest. Jeremy Fisher has done the latter. His narrative steers a pragmatic path through, along and with the major characters and the historical events that shape them. Fisher structures his family story though a series of portraits of significant individuals beginning with Jane Cocking in the Cornish mining village of Tywardreath. What the author finds, as he maps the generations, is a God-fearing family whose Wesleyan faith sustains them. They were hardworking, stoic and in search of their 'slice of heaven' in Aotearoa.

This is a family story that speaks to the idea of community, a religious community at first of course but which like many other families, changes and loses some of that faith as the exigencies of distance, migration and change dilute them. It is a family story where family relationships, and those elusive but transcendent links from our present to the past are mapped, are cherished for their memory, and are viewed through a prism of new ideas, new relationships, new hopes and dreams.

Reading the fictional arc of the story of Leonora Frayne, for example, an unmarried sister to Fisher's grandmother May, there is little to criticise in the compassion and commitment the author has to the individual members of his family story. At the same time this is an accomplished historian who has paid close attention to sources, to evidence and to critical analysis.

This story is also part memoir. The use of memoir, fiction, biography and family history is becoming more usual in creative nonfiction. The availability of sources in online indexes and through digitisation has made it possible for research to be completed quickly and efficiently that once was painstakingly slow. However, memory plays a part in shaping a family story and Fisher has ensured his own and his family's memories are evident here. Fisher acknowledges the support of his siblings in the research and writing of this book and the memories of his mother, who by the time it was written, together with his father, had died. The writerly process – who we are writing for, our motivations for writing and how we write – is always a mixture of paying homage to ancestors past and continuing to make peace with those still here.

In the end, how we know the past is shaped by both art and science: by evidence and by imagination. As historians we need always to be on guard; we are not always right, nor always aware of the full complexity of

the past, and nor are our words the final or only words to be written. There are many stories to be written and one story about one family is just that. It is a beginning, as history always is, not an end.

One small quibble; a short family chart would help the general reader to understand individual and family connections more easily in this book. Fisher has a strong commitment to the 'truths' of his history as well as the silences of his family past. He has woven a consistent, personal and rigorous text. History and fiction can journey together to create our family stories. But they journey separately, and in this case, explain the past with compassion, care and much credibility.

Works cited

Modjeska, D 1996 *Poppy*, Penguin Books, Ringwood VIC return to text

Dr Noeline Kyle retired from QUT in 2001, with an emeritus professorship, and continues her academic and professional interests in history with an Honorary Professorship at the University of Sydney and her involvement in local and other history and heritage organisations. Noeline maintains a keen interest in the community through the writing of books, workshops and seminars on writing family history, women's history, especially women's professions, and the history of childhood. Noeline has published Memories & Dreams, a biography of her great grandmother Nurse Mary Kirkpatrick (2001) and A Greater Guilt: Constance Emilie Kent and the Road Murder (2009). Her memoir of childhood Ghost Child was published in 2015. Her books Writing Family History Made Very Easy (Allen & Unwin 2007) and How to write and publish your family story in 10 easy steps (New South Books 2011) are regularly used in writing programs. Noeline maintains a website www.writingfamilyhistory.com.au and travels throughout Australia to support local, family and community history.

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo & Julianne van Loon

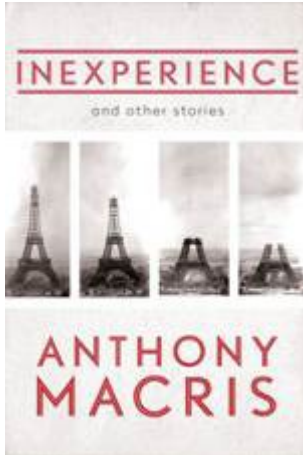
Reviews Editor: Linda Weste

text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT review

A malfunctioning heart bared to the scalpel

review by Helen Gildfind



Anthony Macris

Inexperience and other stories

University of Western Australia Press, Crawley WA 2016

ISBN 9781742588704

Pb 230pp AUD24.99

Anthony Macris's collection of short stories is grouped into two sections, 'Inexperience' and 'Quiet Achievers'. Together, these sections offer a sophisticated and compassionate analysis of masculinity in a modern, consumer, capitalist world.

'Inexperience' gives a young man's first-person recount of travelling overseas with his partner, Carol. He immediately asserts how they've scrimped and saved: money – and middle class aspiration – is thus signalled as a primary concern of the book. Thereafter, he describes how their desire to escape Australia's 'shabby modernity' (3) has propelled them to 'mother Europe' (7), a place where even the toilets have more 'style' than home (7). For the Antipodean traveller, 'culture' is something to be sought in the old world (7), a world which associates Australia with nowhere and the bland suburbs: a Frenchman describes Brisbane as a 'nowhere' place (58), and an English girl seems to think Australia is further away than the moon (83).

This Antipodean couple's middle-class, self-consciousness points to a theme that reappears throughout the book: 'authenticity'. As they struggle to view a painting through a throng of tourists, Carol says: 'enjoy the experience for what it is' (39). 'A real inexperience', he replies. 'Something you're an expert at', she snipes back (39). This sideways argument about what constitutes a 'real' experience exposes the intense pressure each feels to re-invent themselves, as if their 'real' selves are suppressed and need a 'right context' – like the newness and Otherness of a relationship and travel – to emerge. In this story, it is Carol who becomes 'more herself with every passing moment' (53), whilst he remains his old

self – a non-self – trapped in the gendered stereotype of the ‘regulation-issue boyfriend’ (53).

Discarded, he soon meets an English girl, the ‘anti-Carol’ (79), Heather. He has a ‘one week stand’ with her. The contrast between the two relationships reveals how each character struggles to navigate traditional *and* progressive discourses on gender. When he takes Carol to see Napoleon’s sarcophagus, they riff about the hyper-masculine grandiosity of his shrine surrounded by angels. Heather wonders if he took her there because of ‘boy hero fantasy stuff’ (72). He admits this possibility, but points out, ‘If you’re a boy, you have to be a hero, or you’re nothing’ (73). The significance of this statement is lost on Heather – but it is key to the whole collection: What’s it like to be a man who has ‘failed’ to be the masculine hero he’s meant to be?

His relationship with Heather only emphasises his confusion over gender roles. In bed, he suggests they ‘make love’ (96). She replies, ‘No way. Fuck me harder... But not too hard... I like giving myself over. Sometimes’ (96). He says that’s ‘old school’ and against everything he’s been taught (96). She claims it’s what he *believes*. He denies this. She replies, ‘*Bullshit ... C’mon Mr Feminist. Fuck me hard*’ (96). How, the reader wonders, is this guy meant to work out what ‘fuck me hard’ but ‘not too hard’ and only ‘sometimes’ means – literally or metaphorically?! Heather is really just as lost as he is. She’s engaged to a boring, rich Englishman (again, the coercive pressures of money and class are ever-present), and her struggle is most poignantly revealed when the protagonist awakens to her lovely face, cleansed of the heavy make-up she uses to create her sexy, goth-vixen image. Later, looking in the mirror, his own face seems covered in bruises: but the bruises are hers, for it is her make-up, *her* feminine mask, *her* cultural bruising that is smeared on his skin.

The second series of stories, ‘Quiet Achievers’, overtly explores the text’s preoccupation with a ‘moneyed’ sense of self. The first story uses stream-of-consciousness to express the self-flagellation of a man who’s determined to grow himself a nest egg. This distressing monologue of self-loathing expresses his sense of feeling ‘trapped’ (140) inside himself. He wants desperately to see himself as he ‘really’ is:

Like a surgeon I’ll see myself fully exposed, a malfunctioning heart bared to the scalpel. Then I’ll be able to put an end to this life of aimless excess, to plug the leak of precious lifeblood, money. (141)

Again, the spectre of an ‘authentic’ self haunts these characters. Whilst he recognises that compulsive consumption does him no good (‘I’m ... consuming myself an impulse at a time,’ 141) he, paradoxically, believes his true self must be bought: his savings will let him ‘do *anything*, *be* anything’; he’ll never know what he’s ‘*really*’ like till he’s saved enough money; he aspires to ‘become’ money itself (141-143). Objectifying himself (as his culture surely does) by suddenly referring to himself in the third person, he finally shows himself some pity: he sees a ‘half-starved rat in a maze’, trapped in an experiment overseen by the ‘ruthless faces of grey-suited men’ (165). Though he knows it’s foolish to pretend he’s ‘untouched’ by this ‘structure’ that ‘defines’ him (166), he *still* feels that he can and must be self-determining.

This paradox between knowing and feeling – of yearning and striving for the impossible – is common to all the characters, and is further explored in the final two stories. ‘Triumph of the Will’ powerfully evokes the terrible humiliation of a small shop owner. The masculine ‘hero’ motif re-emerges as this character faces the great ‘nothingness’ of his public failure. If he can’t be the hero of his own life, of his own little shop, what is he? He lies in bed, musing on his personal failure even as he damns the monstrous shopping mall that has put him out of business. In the end, he feels he is ‘freefalling’ (177), consumed by the blackness of his insomniac night. ‘The Quiet Achiever’ recounts the story of a student visiting this shop owner in a mental hospital. The student sees, in his friend, ‘total subjugation to an external force’ (182). The tension between the macro and the micro is thus reasserted, and the motif of the masculine ‘hero’ figure reappears when they discuss a *Superman* movie. They focus on a scene where people fall into an ‘abyss’ knowing they’re all ‘going to die’ (185-6). While this scenario reads like an evocation of Nietzschean, existential angst, the shop-owner envies the ‘wonderful feeling’ of freefall (186). The reader wonders if this freefalling self *is* the coveted ‘authentic’ self, for it is the *only* self who is liberated from the delusion that it has control. Though the massive shopping mall can be seen from the hospital grounds, the shop owner *still* believes he is wholly responsible for his failed business: ‘You can’t blame others for your own failings,’ he says, ‘I’ll try again... I’ll get another shop. And this time it’s going to work’ (188). The shop owner’s exhausting struggle to be *anything* in a society and economy that treats him like he’s nothing is ultimately symbolised by his ‘blind’ and desperate attempts to draw a self-portrait: ‘angry, desperate, helpless’ (192) he soon gives up.

‘Inexperience’ offers a beautifully and sensitively written insight into the modern man’s struggle to navigate a world where gender roles are opaque, and where money is – always – the ultimate signifier of value. This collection forces readers to feel the anxieties inherent in every individual’s struggle to exist as an authentic ‘self’ in a capitalist, consumer culture that depends on both promising *and* denying the very possibility that such a self can ever be realised.

Helen Gildfind lives in Melbourne and has published in Australia and overseas.

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo & Julianne van Loon

Reviews Editor: Linda Weste
text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT review

No settling down

review by Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington



John Kinsella
Graphology Poems 1995-2015
Five Islands Press, Parkville VIC 2016
Limited edition three-volume set
ISBN 9780734051639
ISBN 9780734051646
ISBN 9780734051653
Pb 268pp / 281pp / 246pp AUD74.95

1 The act of writing poetry

For some poets the act of writing poetry is almost all to do with producing polished and finished works, and such poets often write relatively few poems. For example, almost every one of Kenneth Slessor's one hundred or so poems are conspicuously 'made' things, crafted and polished as individual works that stand alone in their own poetic space, reflecting a particular, disciplined poetic sensibility. Other poets may produce such polished works but are as much, or more, concerned with poetry as an ongoing inquiry into and investigation of the resources of language and the ways language constructs and construes meaning.

John Kinsella is one such poet – prolific, restless, frequently returning to preoccupations about the environment and the consequences of its degradation and, in doing so, writing a discontinuous poetic chronicle of his experiences in Western Australia's Avon Valley. He is also often focused outwards on international concerns and issues, and on personal and public ethics, and is a traveller who writes about places he visits. In these ways he is powerfully engaged in his poetry with both the quotidian and the abstract.

Yet Kinsella also has another major preoccupation, and that is a continuing investigation of the language of the contemporary lyric, particularly as it manifests in various versions of the contemporary pastoral. This is a

tradition that he has to some extent re-fashioned in his own, sometimes idiosyncratic image, frequently writing what Marthe Reed, following Rob Wilson, terms ‘anti-pastoral’ poetry. In applying this term to Kinsella’s poetry, she states that his ‘dark vision of place recognizes in agriculture, as it has been practiced in Western Australia, nothing of the European idyll of Arcadian happiness’ (Reed 2010: 92).

One interpretation of his complete *oeuvre* is as a questing exploration and a testing of what contemporary poetry might say *in extremis* – particularly in the face of environmental crisis – and how language might be adapted, and even pulled and stressed, in order to say it. The three-volume publication, *Graphology Poems: 1995-2015* foregrounds this enterprise more clearly than any other volume Kinsella has published.

This extended and occasionally sprawling group of poems is explicitly and self-consciously about language, the writing of poetry, and about what poetic gestures may look like as inscriptions of being, self and experience if examined from the perspective of a poet who has made of himself a forensic identity:

Graphology: Forgery Five

I can’t write outside locality
and inside I’m stuck for words.
I can’t connect with the bush telegraph,
though whispers fall where leaves
have already dried and powdered. (vol 3: 196)

In other words, among other things, this book is a way of Kinsella putting his poetic craft under a scrutinising gaze, and asking ‘what do I see here?’ In the hands of a less wide-ranging writer such an enterprise might be largely solipsistic, yet Kinsella’s work justifies this extended excursion into linguistic self-analysis because he finds in his examination of his own task as a poet issues of broad interest, turning this enterprise and its attendant preoccupations outwards.

What are these issues? Impossible to fully summarise across the vast tracts of these three volumes, they are mostly about Kinsella’s repetitive probing of what one might name as an environment-self-language nexus. And they are about politics and social injustice as poetry might understand it – that is, as a restless articulation of contemporary political and social absurdities, strangenesses and injustices perceived through the lens of a writer who refuses to identify with the mainstream and yet has, with a keen sense of irony, contradiction and multiplicity invoked for his own purposes many of its tropes and issues. Such poetry can, at times, be uncompromisingly blunt, and that is the purpose of some of it – to speak directly about what Kinsella believes urgently needs to be said.

Kinsella’s concerns are also about marshalling a sense of the world’s never-containable, protean indeterminacies, channelling them into what one might call the real-unreal of poetic utterance; an utterance that, in Kinsella’s hands is always trying to address large and small things at once, but which knows there is no settling down, never the opportunity for conclusion, and not much that is even temporarily fixed and stable. Nevertheless, the restless inquiry of these volumes states that some things have a continuing importance – that language offers the possibility of a sustained and salutary self-inquisition; and that abstractions garner much of their life from the development of a restless personal ethics centred on

inquiry into and speaking about contemporary values and mores. In this last sense, Kinsella has defined himself as a public poet.

2 Speaking out

In an interview with Harold Bloom about Australian poetry for *In So Many Words* (2013), Bloom stated that it was very good '[f]or Australia to have had Judith Wright, Alec Hope, Les Murray (who can be a very difficult personality – we have had our moments, but still he is a very powerful poet) and John Kinsella' (11). Indeed, Bloom wrote the introduction to Kinsella's *Peripheral Light: Selected and New Poems* (2004), which includes references to similarities between Ashbery's work and Kinsella's. Certainly Kinsella shares Ashbery's interest in longer forms and *Graphology* is a project that ramifies to such an extent that it even extends beyond the confines of these three volumes – indeed, Kinsella has described it as 'the long poem that one writes over a lifetime' (Kinsella nd). While it began in the late 1980s, the first publication of *Graphology* dates back to 1997 when an eponymous booklet was published by Equipage (Cambridge); the second part to *The Radnoti Poems* (1996). Since then, poems from this project have been published in a wide range of print and online journals and books. Many are collected in this three-volume set.

However, in a note reminiscent of 'The Hunting of the Snark' that precedes the contents page, Kinsella states: 'Some [*Graphology* poems] are in other books presently in print (often without their *Graphology* attributions and titles), while others remain (hand-written) in journals and notebooks. Others are difficult to locate.' Furthermore, there are three poem essays, or poem notes, that self-reflexively discuss the *Graphology* project and precede the poems in the first volume. In 'A Short Note on Graphology', Kinsella makes the point that 'the pieces were often composed in a sequential and chronological format, numbered accordingly, though at times the numbering has leapt and reversed and become – seemingly – inconsistent' (1: 13).

In this way, resistance to closure is important to a reading of this behemoth of a poem (or sprawl of poem-parts). Scholar Nic Birns in his essay on *Graphology* has described it as 'a vast dilating rhizome' (Birns 2016). Indeed, while the poems in *Graphology* are numbered, they challenge any notion of genesis and chronology. The project's inbetweenness emphasises a kind of nomadism, where the reader becomes a wanderer in something non-linear and non-hierarchical.

Of course, graphology is both the study of handwriting, especially when it is regarded as an expression of the writer's character, and in linguistics it is the study of systems of writing like grammatology. Kinsella refers to graphology as both 'pseudo-science' and 'alchemy'; a kind of 'fortune telling' (1: 11). These definitions are essential to any understanding of Kinsella's poems in this collection. *Graphology* is about what is false and subversive, just as much as it is about truth. Its use of space and of typography is important to its ruminations on mapping the land and the merging of landscapes; about what is constructed, made, forged (in a number of senses of that word) and destroyed. While much of the text is printed, there are moments when the typography is replaced by handwriting or something hand-drawn, as in volume one's 'Graphology: Canto 10', where the poem moves from palatino font, to what we imagine

may be Kinsella's own handwriting – which he earlier states is 'almost illegible' (1: 11). In such instances, the poem becomes an enactment of the urge to inscribe, and the promise in the title of being able to read certain significances in the writing of another is almost offered up:

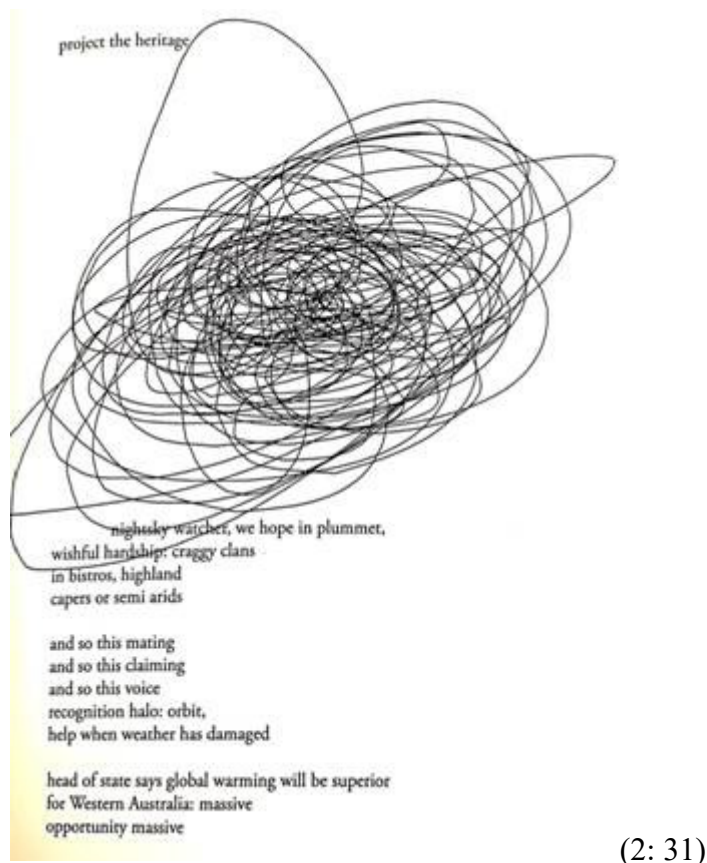


(1: 49)

A kind of subordination is clear from the reference to the postscript and in the use of 'as hypotactic' as the first handwritten words in this poem; there is often something beneath the words, a play that is constructed as a palimpsest. This is even more obvious in volume two, where the handwriting becomes more freehand and focused on land patterns. The cursive writing grows into loops and lines, moving into computer-generated or interpreted lines. Most dramatically, in 'Claimant Triptych', the curve of cursive writing becomes a comment not only on borders, but a 'recognition halo: orbit,/ help when weather has damaged' (2: 31). It is perhaps even the personification of global warming:

head of state says global warming will be superior
 for Western Australia: massive
 opportunity massive (2: 31)

Again, what lies beneath is important. The scribble – as it first appears – is another reference to overwriting and fakery; a comment on signatures as a form of security. It is almost a parody of signature:



In volume three, there are no handwritten moments, perhaps suggesting that handwriting is a dying art, as writers so often compose on computers and as signatures become digital. In his book, *Disclosed Poetics: Beyond Landscape and Lyricism* (2007), Kinsella states:

The signature, written by hand, is a false fingerprint – it is a construct. And this is the clue to decoding the work as it unravels. It is also a poem concerned with issues of belonging, ownership and recording identity. (Kinsella 2007: np)

This gestures to *Graphology*'s exploration of the unreliability of memory and its inconsistency. In this way, the poems in *Graphology* point to the inauthentic, which exists as part of the veritable. Indeed, Kinsella suggests this infallibility can lead to false memories and, by extension, false identities. This, in turn, posits questions about Kinsella's *obiter dicta* and public persona concerning *Graphology*. He has discussed the project in interviews, blogs and books. Could he be providing the reader with the key and yet simultaneously gesturing away them away from it, in a Carrollian effort to encourage the reader to find their own meaning? Indeed, it is the subversive quality of the long poem, its illusive shifting sand, that helps make reading it a biotic interaction.

In this light it is interesting to consider the opening of the first of the ekphrastic poems in the sequence 'Graphological Six Poems After *Six Paintings* by Karl Wiebke':

Your subject is our field to tackle.
Your paint is our landscape: hewn
as dune and outcrops, discharges
and fertilisations. Gross and fine.
Not aerial necessarily. We travel

or transit or climb or wrestle
 from left to right, head to toe,
 and in reverse. Verso unto recto.
 Vice versa. (2: 34)

Kinsella might almost be talking about his own work rather than Wiebke's, and offering a challenge to his readers to 'tackle' his poetry as their own 'field' and 'landscape'. Such an invitation represents a dual impulse of invitation and resistance and it lies at the heart of these three volumes of poems and their interconnectedness – and it gives this long poem, at least, a notional cohesiveness. While *Graphology* includes runs of sequences (short and long sequences titled, for example, 'Holograph', 'Un-numbered', 'Faith', 'Icon', 'Heuristics' and even 'Cambridge Psychedelia'), there are no clear beginnings and endings; indeed many poems are untitled and form their own silent sequence(s). Kinsella is exploring ways in which the oppositional is concatenated. In this way, pessimism about the environment manifests itself in hope for the future. While many reviewers choose the more overtly political poems to explicate, two poems that are quietly optimistic and demonstrate Kinsella's private nature in the construction of a public identity, are 'Graphology 4247: A *True* Dream Recounted' and the final poem in volume three, 'Graphology Mutations 27'.

In 'Graphology 4247...' Kinsella italicises the word 'True' in the title of the poem to question and ironise the veracity of his re-telling. Such a gesture signals his awareness that all stories are bound up in interpretation and are potentially problematised by the individual's shifting perspectives. A dream narrative is even more unreliable because it is born in sleep and the unconscious and, what is more, because this is a poem it may not even be *true*. In the poem itself, Kinsella addresses his personal choice not to fly, in an amusing vision of silence where an airline is 'designed for readers of Shakespeare quartos, / or, at a stretch, folios':

I dreamt a travel agent
 tried to convince me to fly
 again: the lure or allure
 was an airline specialising
 in transatlantic silence:
 flights designed for readers
 of Shakespeare quartos,
 or, at a stretch, folios:
 delectable silence at altitude,
 with the ocean and attendant
 tempests far below: floating
 above the viscera of drama,
 the earthiness plights plots
 and language are filched from.
 Come fly, fly with us:
 dreamliners, prompters
 of eternal tomorrows. (2: 266)

Importantly, the narrator in this poem manages to be above earthly problems and drama yet entirely invested in them; just as one might argue that the reader of Shakespeare's quartos or folios is perhaps bookish and yet common in the way 'plight plots / and language are filched from' his plays. This is underscored by Kinsella's referencing of *The Tempest* in this poem and also *Macbeth* in the 'eternal tomorrows' and perhaps even Banquo in the repetition of 'fly'.

Just as Fleance is urged to fly from treachery, Kinsella is flying above the treachery of humans as custodians of the land. In this way, Kinsella's public persona is built on private moments and scattered intertextual poetic references. This is particularly evident in 'Graphology Mutations 27', where Kinsella's son and partner are referenced against a backdrop of music from *Heidenröslein* and the 'tearing and grinding' of the 'heavy machinery' wreaking destruction on the valley:

As heavy machinery eats away at the valley
I hear a beautiful voice raise to a high G

as Tim sings Schubert's setting of Goethe's
poem on young love, 'Heidenröslein.' Tracy

has given him the German as part of his lesson
and recalling the tune precisely from his iPod

though he hasn't heard it for months, he sings
over the tearing and grinding of the digger –

rosebud and thorn, the reachable beauty
staying unreachable in a damaged world.

I am stunned by the guileless weaving
of a future that will entice and hurt,

by what I miss transfixed at the fall of a tree
as heavy machinery eats away at the valley. (3: 246)

Where 'Graphology 4247...' ends on the promise of 'eternal tomorrows' with the narrator floating dream-like in his / her Dreamliner, the narrator of 'Graphology Mutations 27' describes the 'future' as one of 'entice and hurt'. The huge mouth of 'machinery eat[ing] away at the valley' is a dark parody of Tim singing a 'high G' as the rhyming couplet and midline rhyme of 'tree', 'valley' and 'machinery' ends in its own music. Indeed, the use of *Heidenröslein* as an intertext also references what Kinsella has described in his poetic essay, 'Points of Modulation', as the music that holds these poems together: 'The shifts between poems are equivalent to pivot chord modulations in music' (1: 14). This underscores Kinsella's belief that 'Letters of protest are also ways of saying thanks. To protest against the destruction of bushland is to affirm the necessity or sanctity of that bushland...' (1: 14). It is the eternal tension between the 'rosebud and thorn'.

3 Poetry as a porous form of activism

Kinsella's reputation extends beyond poetry to his blog with Tracy Ryan, 'Mutually Said: Poets Vegan Anarchist Pacifist'. He is also present on YouTube, such as when he reads his 'Bulldozer' poem [1]. In *Poetry and Activism Undammed* Gary Snyder argues, 'poetry is a form of activism. If you write things down that go out into the community, they will affect change' (Snyder 2012: np). Writer and scholar Louis (Luke) Menand, who has been labelled a public intellectual but eschews the title, argues that it is more than this. He believes a poet who is identifiable as a public intellectual needs to write with activism in mind; it is not enough for poems to be interpreted as activist by a reader. And perhaps the most famous public intellectual, Noam Chomsky, argues that the cliché of the

public intellectual ‘speaking truth to power’ is a pious phrase that conceals truth. He believes that it is people who are oppressed by those in power – not those in positions of power – who need the truth. He divides public intellectuals into two distinct categories: conformist public intellectuals and dissident ones. For Chomsky, the dissident public intellectuals are important precisely for their dissension (Atherton 2014: 128).

Kinsella may be identified as a dissident poet public intellectual for his activist poetry. He states:

When I write an ‘activist poem’, I want it to be
misinterpreted as much as interpreted; I want even
something that seems overt to be questionable – at least
through that basic and fallible device: irony ... the writing
of poems becomes part of a mantra of witness and
empowerment. (Kinsella 2010: 3)

Poetic activism of this kind is in a variety of ways porous. It steps out into the quotidian world to encounter the occasions it addresses and to register its protests, and it simultaneously steps back into the poetic, which is always partly about the action of language. As it does so it brings a highly constructed language into the realm of public debate, and takes back into the poetic the grit and noise of the activist’s engagements. As a result, poetic structures made in the crucible of activism are often neither entirely ‘poetic’ in the conventional sense, nor entirely ‘activist’ in the sense of campaigning for direct and immediate change (although some of Kinsella’s poetry does do this). Rather, many of these poems exist as both public statements and private accounts of what Kinsella calls ‘witness’, but which might equally be understood in this context as an urge to see and make known.

The result is poems of great diversity, some of which sit a little uncomfortably on the page, seeming to want to stand more immediately in the public space at which their considerable energy is directed. Others are more obviously ‘poetic’, yet even such poems are capable of questioning the usefulness of making ‘text’:

Graphology Relapse 37

Window is empty:
show restraint
and kept text
out of it. (3: 87)

Overall, *Graphology* speaks to Kinsella’s preoccupation with finding something of the poetic almost everywhere he looks, and with making his transformations of language speak of as many different kinds of experiences as he can. This book suggests that acting and speaking are inseparable, and that saying is, *in itself*, an important part of doing. Further, if some of the ‘saying’ in these three volumes challenges the artificiality and limitations of conventional language use, other poems make fairly conventional use of language but use it to challenge the world that the poems address. Still other poems remember – sometimes in strange and ambiguous ways – the powerful and ancient lyric tradition that, in its own ways, continues to inform so much contemporary poetry even in the skeptical twenty-first century:

Graphology Heuristics 13

Cloth ear hangs on clothesline.
 Hung out to dry. Smokey, hazy day.
 A mirror of itself. Hear it.
 Hear it gossiping.
 Swish. Swish.
 A field.
 A bird.
 A fish. (3: 111)

There is something simultaneously plain-speaking, lyrical and rather surreal about this short work, and such mixed tropes characterise much of what Kinsella attempts. In *Graphology* we are able to read him (reading himself) as lyrical, anti-lyrical, polemical, questioning, observant, quizzical, philosophical, critical and ironic, all at once. This may be what is most significant about the *Graphology* project in the end – its ramifying openness and the interconnecting complexities of its sometimes riddling texts. Often the spaces of these poems open out to reveal absences or to imply other texts that are (as far as we know) yet to be articulated. In this volume it is the sum of the incomplete parts that implies a greater whole.

It may partly have been Kinsella's reputation as a poet public intellectual that made the publication of this limited edition three-volume set of poetry possible: he is one of perhaps two or three Australian poets with an established international reputation. With more than 740 *Graphology* poems collected from at least 4700 poems in a three-volume 'limited' edition, it has not been produced for a broad readership. However, *Graphology* asks a small group of dedicated readers and writers of poetry to think intelligently and politically about the world and about language and to lobby, even in small ways, to enact change.

Notes

[1] Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xhf2dRIUbVU> return to text

Works cited

Atherton, C 2014 *In So Many Words: Interviews with Writers, Scholars and Intellectuals*, Australian Scholarly Press, Melbourne return to text

Birns, N 2016 'Landscape Eaten By Foliage: John Kinsella's *Graphology Poems*'. Available at <http://fiveislandspress.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Landscape-Eaten-By-Foliage-Nic-Birns.pdf> return to text

Kinsella, J 2007 *Disclosed Poetics: Beyond Landscape and Lyricism*, Manchester University Press, Manchester return to text

Kinsella, J 2010 *Activist Poetics: Anarchy in the Avon Valley*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool return to text

Kinsella, J nd 'The Long Poem: the Sequence, and the Concept Poem-Book'. Available at <http://www.johnkinsella.org/essays/longpoem.html> return to text

Reed, M 2010 'John Kinsella's Anti-Pastoral: A Western Australian Poetics of Place', *Antipodes* 24, 1: 92. Available at <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/antipodes/vol24/iss1/26> return to text

Snyder, G 2012 'Poetry and Activism Undammed'. Available at <http://aletageorge.blogspot.com.au/2012/03/poetry-and-activism-undammed.html> return

to text

Cassandra Atherton is an award-winning writer, academic and scholar. She was a Harvard Visiting Scholar, sponsored by Stephen Greenblatt, in 2016 and was a Visiting Fellow at Sophia University, Tokyo in 2014. She has published eight books (with two more in progress) and is the successful recipient of more than fifteen national and international grants and teaching awards, including an Australia Council Grant and a VicArts grant. Her most recent books of prose poetry are Trace (Finlay Lloyd) and Exhumed (Grand Parade).

Paul Hetherington is Professor of Writing at the University of Canberra and head of the International Poetry Studies Institute (IPSI). He has published eleven full-length collections of poetry, including the recently released Burnt Umber (UWA Publishing 2016) and Gallery of Antique Art (Recent Work Press 2016) and five chapbooks. He won the 2014 Western Australian Premier's Book Awards (poetry), was shortlisted for the 2013 Montreal International Poetry Prize and commended in the 2016 Newcastle Poetry Prize. He was also recently shortlisted for the international 2016 Periplum Book Competition (UK).

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo & Julianne van Loon

**Reviews Editor: Linda Weste
text@textjournal.com.au**

TEXT review

Who is merciful?

review by Charlotte Clutterbuck



Kevin Brophy

Misericordia: Poems inspired by the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy

Salt Wattle Press, Parkville VIC 2016

ISBN 9780734053046

Pb 38pp AUD15.00



The Faces of Mercy: An Australian offering for the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy

Michael Campbell, producer / director

Kevin Brophy, poet

Niké Arrighi Borghese, painter

George Palmer, composer

Australian Catholic University, Archdiocese of Sydney NSW 2016

DVD 50 minutes AUD Price on enquiry

A chapbook of fifteen poems, Kevin Brophy's *Misericordia* is part of a multi-form artistic response to the Jubilee of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis in 2016. The accompanying DVD records a performance of music, text, Brophy's poems, and *The Faces of Mercy*, a triptych by painter Niké Arrighi Borghese. Michael Campbell's performance text provides a

context for Brophy's poems by selecting phrases from the Psalms and Pope Francis, the whole set to music by composer George Palmer, and performed by St Mary's Cathedral Choir, Sydney. The performance is divided into three segments: Despair, Desolation; Pardon, Hope; Mercy, Love.

Matching the wateriness of Arrighi Borghese's paintings, Campbell's text chooses some of the wateriest psalms – tears, groans, overwhelming floods. In speaking some of these phrases, soprano Amelia Farrugia's dramatic projection of a self-pitying psalmist at his most melodramatic sounds somewhat shrill. Where his complaints were sung, her clear high notes are well-suited to Palmer's ethereal music.

In contrast, Brophy's measured and natural reading of his poems allows his words to be absorbed and savoured. In the chapbook too, Brophy's poems benefit from a slow and thoughtful reading.

Apart from one ekphrastic poem, 'On *The flight into Egypt*', Brophy avoids retelling time-worn stories, images and injunctions from the Gospels, preferring a more allusive approach. Thus in 'Our Human Hands', both Resurrection and Crucifixion are lightly suggested:

when the years become our sorrows' lessons,
and there's no turning back without an angel

at the rock...

what are the lessons for
when answers are hammered to a wall... (11)

A sensual honouring of the experience of baking, eating, and sharing, 'All Bread', uses the sacredness of the mundane loaf of bread to suggest the sharing and physicality of the Eucharist.

For Brophy, mercy isn't a thing but a process consisting of merciful actions – someone shows mercy to someone else. The 'someone' in these poems is various: 'In the Presence of the Lion' implores God to 'Put in our hands' a responsiveness that 'we' must in turn give attentively to 'each person', 'this planet', each 'new name' for a child, and even 'our poor minds'. 'From the Book of Examples' accuses a society that fails in mercy, denying refugees safety, hope, freedom, and thus fails to become the Kingdom of God's love and mercy, remaining only 'a kingdom of ends'. In 'Everything About to Happen' the speaker opens the door to a stranger, prepared to offer 'food and warmth' despite the attendant dangers:

I expect no mercy from the world
the danger is clear...

Opening the door means openness to 'what mischief, what love, what sorrow' and is the means whereby the speaker receives

the world in my eyes
and everything about to come to pass. (20)

Brophy constructs varied voices and styles to speak each poem, from the ruminating, complex syntax of 'Our Human Hands' to the direct prayer of 'In the Presence of the Lion' or the accusations of 'From the Book of Examples' where the repeated complaint 'You have made an example of me' recalls the outrage of Zola's 'J'accuse'.

His syntax uses remarkably varied and complex sentence structures, sometimes making considerable demands on the reader. In 'Our Human Hands' a string of subordinate clauses of time ('when... when... when...') and condition (if... if...if...) interspersed with the repeated question 'what are the lessons for' construct a page-long sentence where musical couplets with delicate rhymes and half-rhymes build to the climax of the single last line, closing emphatically at the only full stop in the poem:

despite the wrongs our human hands still make.

This approach requires and repays a slow rereading. Writing courses often advise writers to prefer positive expressions because small negative markers can be missed on a hasty reading, resulting in an interpretation the opposite of intended. Double that for the quadruple negations and reversals (almost / nothing / but / not) of 'There will be almost nothing / but what has not been plundered' ('Elena!'). Rereading the poem, I could appreciate its shifting from a destructive present tense in which 'We are building the ruins' to a future time when the concrete specifics of the past can only be imagined:

The ruins will be shattered vowels
the last unbreakable consonants
left for latecomers to imagine

what might have been said
from a second-storey window
on a Sunday morning late in April

when a woman called from the street
Elena! Elena! –
to her friend above.

The poem builds to the conclusion that we are building a world where 'Dusk will eat each day' and

Elena, leaning over her red geraniums
on her window sill calls back to her friend
in a voice that carries all that will be ruined.

While Brophy's allusive and varied approaches work well in many individual poems, the structure of the whole collection is less persuasive. It is a hard task to write, more or less on commission, a set of poems on a subject so often canvassed by the Bible, Shakespeare, *Paradise Lost*, and so on. Egocentric and self-pitying the Psalmist may be, but the stable persona and passionate build up of his pleas give the Psalms an emotional force that Brophy's poems don't match. For example, in the opening section 'Despair, Desolation' the sense of despair is reduced by the different and generalised voices: a nonspecific 'we' in 'Our Human Hands' and 'Elena!'; a representative refugee in 'From the Book of Examples'. Tone too mitigates the desolation: gentle and accepting in 'Our Human Hands'; elegiac in 'Elena!'; angry and accusing in 'From the Book of Examples'.

Similarly, the poems in the section 'Mercy, Love' don't fully bear the weight of the subject. Sometimes their examples seem time-worn: St Joseph or St Francis in 'On *The Flight into Egypt*' and 'His Dear Prison'. Sometimes, as with the doorknocking woman in 'Waiting and its Surprises' the connection to mercy seems very tangential. The adult talking to a child in 'Merciful' is seen as it were through the wrong end of

a telescope, far away, the words unheard, the context unknown. Yet this is also a demonstration of Brophy's humility in the face of a topic that could easily have become pretentious or precious. His poems pay attention to the ordinary, displaying a dedication to the small and unremarked. Unlike the Psalmist, he avoids melodrama and self-pity.

Well filmed and edited, the DVD provides an excellent record of the performance of *The Faces of Mercy*. It is heartening to see that the Church which paid for so many artistic, literary and musical jewels of Western civilisation is still a patron of the arts.

It is perhaps fitting that a work sponsored by the Church and inspired by the Pope's message should draw heavily on the words of Pope Francis. Nevertheless, given our multicultural modern world, I am disappointed that *The Faces of Mercy* is so solidly Catholic. Arrighi Borghese's paintings centre on Pope Francis as the climactic central figure; the only other recognisable figure is Mother Theresa. Campbell's text quotes exclusively from the Psalms and Pope Francis. Brophy's use of St Francis in 'His Dear Prison' and two epigraphs from Pope Francis also suggest a Catholic heritage. Setting aside the curious absence of anything much from the Gospels (The Good Samaritan? The Prodigal Son? Matthew 25?), are there no examples of merciful Protestants, Jews, Hindus, atheists, Buddhists, Muslims? The Catholic Church does perform many works of mercy, whether funding education for the poorest Cambodians or helping the homeless in Australia, but is mercy the sole preserve of the Catholics? Jesus' story sets the failure of the orthodox Priest and Levite against the mercy shown by the despised, outcast Samaritan. A Catholic I may be, but I know all too well that mercy hasn't always been exercised by a Church responsible for crusades, inquisitions and child abuse. *The Faces of Mercy* fails to acknowledge that the Catholic Church itself, like any other human person or institution, needs to ask for mercy.

Charlotte Clutterbuck has taught Creative and Academic Writing for many years in many contexts – Adult Education, High School English, and most recently as adviser to PhD students at UNSW Canberra. Her poems, essays, reviews and articles have appeared in many literary journals and anthologies both in Australia and overseas. She has published three collections of poetry: Soundings (Five Islands 1997), Ion (Piccolo 2012) and Brink (Picaro 2013).

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo & Julianne van Loon

Reviews Editor: Linda Weste
text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT review

Attending to life

review by Jane Williams



Owen Bullock
River's Edge
Recent Work Press, Canberra ACT 2016
ISBN 9780994456526
Pb 88pp AUD12.95

River's Edge is Owen Bullock's fourth collection of haiku. I've admired many of Bullock's individual haiku over the years but this is the first of his collections that I've read and doing so has led me to seek out his earlier books.

As a reader who appreciates the book-as-artifact, *River's Edge* is a delight to hold; soft and light in the hand, small enough to slip into a coat pocket. The title's font gives the appearance of being submerged in the yellow / green water of the cover image. The same image is replicated on the back cover with the title reversed in a 'mirror image' effect; an apt wrapping for the shape-shifting and ultimately revealing words therein.

The ordering of poems in a collection impacts on how well the collection works as a whole, and in *River's Edge* it works seamlessly. An aspect of each haiku on the verso page balances or compliments the haiku on the recto page, sometimes as a reconfiguration of a moment, for instance,

a gap
then the rainbow touches
another cloud (10)

the blush
in the sky has faded
morning (11)

and at other times as the next episode in a narrative, for example,

meditation
I let go
what I lost (50)

somewhere
in that mass of cloud
a few of your cells (51)

In an introduction to *River's Edge*, Bullock tells us of his move from (making a living from) editing and teaching to care-giving for the elderly. This desire to play more of a 'hands on', benevolent role in society and the inherent non-material rewards that stem from such a role are evident from the first haiku:

dusting
her little vases
this is my devotion (3)

Here we have a personal account of the writer's devotion as care-giver to 'her' that also conveys the wider implication of 'dusting' as 'devotion' – that the smallest act of domesticity done attentively, with love even, is its own reward.

In her essay 'Haiku Techniques' the late Jane Reichhold (renowned writer and publisher of Japanese short forms) discusses 'The Above as Below Technique' where the first and third line at their strongest exhibit a completeness (Reichhold 2000). We can see this technique at work in Bullock's haiku. In removing the second line we're 'left' with –

dusting

this is my devotion

His collection is full of acts of attending to the everyday with affability and respect; human connection is shown to be a vital counterpoint to professionalism:

massaging
my male client's back
in a bloke-ish way (41)

As someone who considers walking an integral part of her own creative process and of being in the world, one of my favourite haiku in the collection is –

walking a road
I drive daily
nothing familiar (25)

An initial surface read by someone new to haiku could interpret the tone / message as one of apathy but with a deeper (slower) read what comes to light is a startling revelation – that by simply moving from the fast lane (driving) to the slow lane (walking) a whole 'new' world opens up. While the sentiment of this revelation is of course not a new one, the individual's experience of it is, and that is what this haiku celebrates and illuminates so successfully. As with the best of other, longer poetry, the best haiku keep giving with each read.

There is irony and humour too, juxtaposing similar and contrasting images to reinforce or surprise:

in the surf
a skinhead
breast-stroking (22)

avoiding the bumps mascara in progress (57)

From Basho (as wandering artist) and Issa (as humanist) to Shiki (as observer and creator of haiku as we know it today), the meandering and revelatory journey of this succinct and challenging art form continues.

Since the 1950s, Western practice and interpretation of haiku has flourished, morphing from the traditionalist 5 / 7 / 5 three line format steeped in the natural world, to first person one-liners and even four-liners attracting countless poets from the likes of Jack Kerouac to Seamus Heaney.

River's Edge honours the human experience as part of the natural world – there are very few haiku in the collection that do not have a human component. Like the birds in Aldous Huxley's final book 'Island' that mimic the word 'Attention', these haiku remind us to attend to the 'smallest' moments of our lives, as if it is they that shape and define us.

Works cited

Reichhold, J 2000 'Haiku Techniques', *Frogpond: Journal of the Haiku Society of America* 23, 3: 63-74 return to text

Jane Williams is based in Tasmania and writes in a variety of forms, including haiku. Her most recent book is Days Like These: New and selected poems 1998-2013. She has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Canberra and has read her poetry in several countries including Slovakia where she held a three month artist residency in 2016 and created a series of photo-haiga.
janewilliams.wordpress.com

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo & Julianne van Loon

Reviews Editor: Linda Weste

text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT review

Saying / not saying

review by Rose Lucas



Eddie Paterson

redactor

Whitmore Press, Geelong VIC 2016

ISBN 9780987386687

Pb 120pp AUD24.95

Eddie Paterson's debut collection of poetry, *redactor*, plays with ideas of what can be said, what isn't said and what it might be possible to interpret across a variety of modes. While we might think of 'redaction' as being primarily concerned with forms of censorship, these poems push and nigger a reader to think laterally about the multiple ways in which the idea of the 'the blank' or being blanked out might operate: in terms of self-censorship, as a way of making a particular more generalisable, even as a method for drawing attention to that which might appear to be self-deprecating, cloaked in discretion. The collection after all is titled *redactor*; these textual clusters are not merely – or not simply – passive victims of a censor's knife, but in fact are also potentially actors using the technique of redaction as others might use the dash or the white space on a page. *Redactor* is about the things that are said on the surface, with directness and verve and engagement. It is also about the nuance under the word, the often punning or uncomfortable space levered open by irony or the graphic [REDACTED].

As Derrida put it (although literary theory is a very light touch here), meaning is 'under erasure', just the merest trace still visible under the obscurity of the inscribed word. The poems themselves highlight the idea that everything in this fast world of multiple discourses and global identifications can be co-opted into material for poetic language. If all poetry hovers somewhere on a spectrum between the specificity and subjectivity of the poet and an external world which can be observed, catalogued, responded to, then these poems self-consciously experiment with that permeable boundary. They move around between the personal or self-referential - 'is it worth pointing out/that i/would be considered/a giant

in japan?’ (14), or ‘you may now be exposed to a little too much of my writing for which I apologise’ (57) – to fragments from a newspaper, statistics, moments of observation, varieties of what feel like uncensored mental meanderings or snippets of conversation: ‘he’s a bachelor. a bachelor of what? no,/just a bachelor. you have to be a bachelor of something’ (35). Or, in a poem entitled ‘the cuteness of____’, we have what reads like a stream of consciousness, an eclectic accumulation of image, idea and response: ‘a typhoon came to Osaka today it was a lovely friend I got/drenched then i sit a café & japanese lady not likes this as i’ (31).

While drawing a reader in with strategies of surprise, Paterson also uses a number of devices to distance and disrupt the reader: for instance, capitalisation is used erratically with most proper nouns in lower case; the use of the graphics – bolding, the blacked-out line of redaction, shifts in font, the use of images / icons, the use of text boxes; the abbreviation of syntax which makes poems read like jottings or an uncorrected first draft; the ironic use of the scholarly footnote. These techniques of dislocation can work productively to prise open a reader’s expectations, unsettling us with meta-questions such as: what is poetry? How does language work? How – or should – I identify meaning in this collection of often seemingly random semantic significations? However, where the structuring role of the poetic imagination is muted in order to maximise ambiguity and disruption, a reader might either become too disoriented and lose connection to the text or, alternatively, be jolted into taking a more proactive role in negotiating these textual fields of word / white space / redaction. As Paterson notes in the poem ‘verfremdungseffekt’, the technique of alienation always plays for high stakes.

If a key stylistic motif in the collection is the effect of the draft, the seemingly spontaneous present tense text, the central model is that of the email or the text message – texts produced through a digital technology which not only operates as another point of interface between speaker and listener / reader but in fact also shapes the mode of that communication. From the apparent privacy of the email – where it can feel possible to think aloud and to be in a hermetically sealed relationship with a reader – text is actually launched into the public sphere, impossible to reclaim or control. The published poem reproduces this tension between intimacy and public speech, the crafted text and the looser patterns of thought and speech.

The second section of the collection, ‘call and response’ moves into more of an exchange or dialogic mode. Again, by emulating the text message or email, there is a sense of delay, the hovering of text in the ether that may or may not connect with anyone else, to which there may or may not be a reply. The voice in these poems appears to be attempting to make contact, to presuppose existing relationships in which there is already a shared space of listening and responding: eg ‘well done about the donkey keep it up & for gods sake get to/rio & take some coke’ (109). Like the email, they seem to offer a space which is both intimate – conversations we are already in the middle of – and yet are operating in the public domain. And where exactly do they place us, the reader of the poem? Do we stand in as the recipient of the ‘email / poem’? Are we eavesdropping on someone else’s conversation? Are we excluded? Or is this how we are actually positioned in relation to all texts, all productions of meaning – hovering on the edge of other scripts, only partially heard or understood exchanges? These poems prise apart text and meaning, speaker and recipient.

Beginning with a poem entitled 'love story' and concluding with another 'love poem', Paterson also explicitly situates his exploratory poetic within the idea of love as a meta form of connection – the longed-for resolving of the conversational or textual loop, an email answered, a back story or sub-text understood and accepted. There may be a plethora of things that distract and divide, but it seems that *redactor* has not given up entirely on the counter principle of coherence and synergy: 'leave me with the park with the sun & that afternoon when/unexpectedly you moved away from kafka & toward me' (114).

Dr Rose Lucas is a Melbourne poet who teaches in the Graduate Research Centre at Victoria University.

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo & Julianne van Loon

Reviews Editor: Linda Weste
text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT review

Shades of life

review by Niloofar Fanaiyan



Louise Nicholas
The List of Last Remaining
Five Islands Press, Parkville 2016
ISBN 9870734051998
Pb 89pp AUD25.95

The List of Last Remaining by Louise Nicholas is a collection full of depth and diversity, a narrative of fractures in time where people and places mirror each other and become windows into the human condition. She combines the craft of poetry with memoir, drawing the reader into intimate moments. From memories of childhood to historical events and reflections on aging, Nicholas weaves a tapestry of experience and meaning-making. There is a circularity to this narrative, which Nicholas begins 'On the day our parents went out in the boat and didn't come back' (9) and ends with 'the list of last remaining' (85), and where many of the poems in-between contain fragments of the whole.

About halfway through the book we enter the realm of a mother with dementia, the process of dying, and letting go. While the collection feels, at times, heavy with the presence of ghosts, there are points at which they are blatantly invoked: 'Before I leave the nursing home / I call upon my father, / dead these thirty years, / to sit beside my mother, take her hand / and repeat his vows of sixty years ago' (42). To an extent it is absence and the absent, the process and inevitability of loss, that repeatedly arise within these poems. Anticipation or knowledge of loss can give rise to longing for the past and meditating on how that loss will effect change, whether it is the passing of childhood into adulthood as in 'Aged thirteen' (17) or a relationship that never was as in 'If on a winter's night' (73).

In 'Family tree' Nicholas writes of the slow decline and changing position of her mother in their family: 'our circle / has become pear-shaped. Our mother sits at the stem, / apart from its burgeoning flesh. It's as though / she's returning to the tree to stake her claim beside / her sister. Her parents

are on the sheltering bough above' (39). In this poem the term 'family tree' becomes a complex analogy for the interplay of relationships and the circle of life. At the end of the poem 'a pear falls; nestles / into the long grass at the foot of the tree' (39); although it is initially considered a loss, this pear will inevitably feed the tree that bore it and create new stems and branches. The end and the beginning are one in this metaphor. The poem, like others in the collection, depicts life as a mirror where the absent are at hand and those present are already gone.

Despite the continuity of family and narrative that seems to pervade much of the collection, Nicholas's own death is treated with a dreaded finality. In 'Death by Wikipedia' she writes, 'I'm almost afraid to Google myself lest / Wikipedia, alerted to my existence, / set down my date of birth and thenceforth / stand over me, a mirror in one hand / and in the other, the sharpened steel of an en-dash / upon which to impale, (disambiguation not- / withstanding) four final debilitating digits' (53). Again, we are presented with a picture of life as it is reflected in the mirror – in motion and complete. It is almost as though the life lived is required to leave evidence of itself.

Not long after the invocation of her father, Nicholas reflects on how the loss of her mother effects the reality of her name, a name which her mother sounded out before she was born; 'So when she died / my name for a time / lost its grace / became shape without shadow / question without answer' (46). To be a shape without shadow is the epitome of meaninglessness since, as she reminds us in the end, it is shadow that forces 'light / to find an opening' and to give 'us all pattern' (85). These patterns are found everywhere, in the arrivals hall in Tel Aviv, in a kitchen while brewing tea, on Southport Island watching seals, in Boston listening to a busker sing the blues, and at four in the morning whilst 'trying to snare some words on a page' (81).

Woven intermittently throughout this book of poems – a type of lyrical memoir – are moments where Nicholas steps back from the narrative and offers the reader a parallel path of meaning-making. Towards the end of the collection, 'In search of something to live by' touches on the universality of the human condition. One cannot deny another 'as if we don't all love, as if we don't all think ourselves / innocent among the guilty, as if all change-room mirrors / don't look at us and lie' (74). She suggests that 'we are all the woman / on the balcony in Kuala Lumpur' (75), and therefore her search 'for something to live by has ended yet again in this: / *Wherever I go, there I am*' (75). Once more, we are presented with a reflection – we are all mirrors of each other, mirrors of being, and windows into the story of our time.

It is the allusion to a universal humanity that brings Nicholas's poetry full circle – all human experience is a part of the whole, and, indeed, moments of her narrative are moments in all narrative. In the final poem she suggests a way of reading these shades of life, these fractures in time where we become mirrors and windows, and ultimately she chooses laughter 'because it joins the dots, / allows us to find the sense in senseless, / connects us all to the last' (85). Thus Nicholas prompts the reader to go back to the beginning and look for the dots that require joining, a series of ambiguity, and a list of what remains.

Niloofar Fanaiyan writes poetry and short fiction. She was the 2016 Donald Horne Research Fellow at the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research, University of Canberra, where she obtained her PhD. She received the Canberra Critics Circle Award for Poetry in 2016 for her first book of poetry, Transit.

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo & Julianne van Loon

Reviews Editor: Linda Weste

text@textjournal.com.au

TEXT review

Two women coping

review by Rachel Hennessy



Glenice Whitting
Something Missing
Made Global Publishing, London 2016
ISBN 9788494593
Pb 260pp AUD19.95

In 2015, Beth Driscoll raised the ire of three women writers by labelling them ‘middlebrow’. Her article ‘Could Not Put It Down’ for *Sydney Review of Books* caused Antonia Hayes, Susan Johnson and Stephanie Bishop to respond in writing and collectively (and then separately) reject the term, arguing for their right to be evaluated outside the confines of Driscoll’s parameters, defined in the following way:

We can recognise the middlebrow by a set of features. It is associated with women and the middle class. It is reverent towards legitimate culture and thus concerned with quality – the middlebrow shies away from the trashy – at the same time as it is enmeshed in commerce and explicitly mediated. The middlebrow is concerned with the domestic and recreational rather than the academic or professional, it is emotional, and it has a quality of ethical seriousness. These features can combine to make a book vibrantly social, a catalyst for passionate conversations between readers. (Driscoll 2015)

Glenice Whitting’s *Something Missing* seems to fall into the category of middlebrow writing, though this may be a label she too will reject. While I take issue with Driscoll’s focus on exclusively female writers in her *SRB* review (in her book-length work *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century* [2014] she does investigate male writers) the presentation of Whitting’s book and the style of its writing align closely with many of the traits listed above, particularly in its focus on the domestic and the emotional.

In the 1970s two women meet, by chance, in the Australian outback during a holiday. Diane is a young mother, a hairdresser by trade, whose encounter with the older, American Maggie, an assistant to her academic husband, Hank, begins a friendship firstly explored through letters and, as the years pass, through Diane's visits to Maggie. Whilst the writer, wisely, avoids the full epistolary style – using the beginning of letters then veering off into scenes from each of the women's life – it is primarily through missive writing that they present themselves to one another.

From the start Maggie is the 'older and wiser' of the two; she encourages Diane to buy a dictionary and work hard at her grammar and spelling and she is the one who recommends books for Diane to read. We are aware Maggie is not being truthful about the state of her marriage, nor her relationship with one of her daughters, although the true extent of her deception is not revealed until much later in the novel. The friendship appears to have a greater impact on Diane. It is she who begins to enter another type of world: returning to study and falling in love with literature, making a move away from the working arena of hairdressing and stepping, eventually, towards authorship. Maggie, on the other hand, has no such real change to record.

This imbalance of character journey makes for an unsatisfying first third of the work and the absence of chapter breaks give little indication of where the piece is headed. There is a strong sense here of disguised autobiography which, in itself, is not problematic but seems to have limited the shaping of the writing. It does not build towards a climax, instead meandering through the women's lives in a primarily, linear way. At one point, Diane begins to write the novel we are reading and Maggie tries to insist she not leave anyone out, a tenet Diane is reluctant to follow because she knows this to be impossible. In some respects, the author could have taken the same stance and weeded out scenes without strong purpose.

Whitting's writing shows signs of needing more thorough editing. Frequently, particularly in the early stages of the novel, the time shifts are overly quick and the introduction of characters feels rushed, creating confusion. There are also inaccuracies and typographical errors (for instance, the 'recently elected Whitlam Labour [*sic*] government' is incorrectly referenced in the 1990s, instead of in 1973 when they were, in fact, elected, and 'Labour' is a misspelling of 'Labor').

Yet, despite these reservations, there is something to be valued in this story of 'two women, two countries'. Here, I believe Driscoll's terminology provides a lens through which to read *Something Missing*: its focus on the domestic and its concern with emotions sets it apart from plot-driven work and the prosaic realism lends an authenticity to the writing which – if you are prepared to put aside longings for drama or fully realised conflict – can touch the reader.

Perhaps the most poignant moment comes when Maggie lets go of the need to have a 'truthful' account of her life retold and concedes to Diane: 'Do what you like. Maybe add some fiction. I'm not an interesting person' (190). A moment later she hides the reality of her life from Diane: 'Maggie rubs the palm of her hand with her thumb. He abused me you know. Abused me in the bedroom' (191). The reader is given an insight into Maggie's past which Diane is not given access to, even as we have just been made aware that this telling is Diane's / the author's, so we know it to be all fiction of some kind, a neat double-take.

The issue of growing old and the decision to die with dignity is the most successful idea of the work where strong portraits of Hank and Maggie's struggles with the limitations of age contrast with Diane's new incarnation as a writer. The different trajectories of the characters in the latter half of the book serve to evoke sympathy for Maggie, as we come to know her struggles intimately and feel the sadness of her decline.

Whitting has set out to show, in Diane's words, 'two women coping the best way they knew how' with the ups and downs of life. There will be many who believe this is enough to hang an entire novel on and others who need a greater sense of artistry and thematic rendering to feel fully satisfied.

Works cited

Driscoll, B 2014 *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century*, Palgrave Macmillan, London return to text

Driscoll, B 2015 'Could Not Put It Down', *Sydney Review of Books* (20 October). Available at <http://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/could-not-put-it-down/> (accessed 8 February 2017) return to text

Dr Rachel Hennessy's second novel The Heaven I Swallowed (Wakefield Press 2013) was written as part of her PhD at the University of Adelaide. It was longlisted for the Nita B Kibble Award for an established female writer. She tutors creative writing at the University of Melbourne.

TEXT

Vol 21 No 1 April 2017

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo & Julianne van Loon

**Reviews Editor: Linda Weste
text@textjournal.com.au**